Right now, not yet, it’s yet: Canadian Catholic women negotiate feminist and spiritual identities

by

April Weavell

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Royal Roads University
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Supervisor: Jennifer Walinga
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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The members of April Weavell’s Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled

*Right now, not yet, it’s yet: Canadian Catholic women negotiate feminist and spiritual identities*

and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Intercultural and International Communication:

Dr. Jennifer Walinga [signature on file]

Dr. Brigitte Harris [signature on file]

Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon submission of the final copy of the thesis to Royal Roads University. The thesis supervisor confirms to have read this thesis and recommends that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements:

Dr. Jennifer Walinga [signature on file]
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Abstract

This interpretive phenomenological study examines the experiences of five Canadian Roman Catholic feminist women who choose to manage their identities from inside of the Catholic Church. Narratives illuminate the multitude of ways the women ascribe meaning to their experience. Refusing to be bound by the constraints of structural injustices, the women resist labels and dualities, and the categorization of their identities as an either-or. With a commitment to navigate ambiguity and ambivalence, participants construct multiple, fluid, and dynamic identities that enable them to move beyond, yet still remain actively engaged, by critiquing the negative effects of their tradition, and innovatively remapping and reshaping a more inclusive and incarnated spirituality and community of faith. They engage in personal interpretations of doctrine and teachings, create networks within their own and other traditions, heighten their (in)visibility to counter gender imbalances, and embody their spirituality and feminism in all areas of their lives.

**Key words:** Catholic, Canada, feminist, feminist spirituality, gender, identity, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
Acknowledgements

I begin this thesis by acknowledging that the land I reside on is Treaty 8 traditional territory, land that is a traditional meeting ground and home to many Indigenous Peoples, including Métis.

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Chapter One: Introduction

*These questions do not call for the discovery of data; they call for the contemplation of possibility.*  – Joan Chittister

When the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s ushered in a new era in the Roman Catholic Church, women’s roles and opportunities for leadership broadened significantly. Women now serve in a variety of ministries at a parish level and occupy positions previously reserved for men such as theologians, canon lawyers, parish administrators, and diocesan chancellors, and even exercise pastoral leadership in the absence of a priest (Wallace, 1988). Yet well into the twenty-first century, the church remains unwavering to the tradition of a male hierarchy, despite a priest shortage, and doctrinally limits women's roles and decision-making, denying women their full range of potentiality within the church (Ecklund, 2005; Wallace, 1988). The identities of feminist women who choose to remain part of the Catholic tradition are indeed marked by complexity, conflict, and contradictions.

Scholarship shows that in both academics and in religion, the experiences and identities of women in religion have been underestimated or silenced (Vuola, 2017). Other scholars argue that studies have been slow to acknowledge religion as an important part of gender studies and identity research, focusing on too narrow of an understanding of religion (Fuist, 2016; Mahmood, 2005; Vuola, 2017). By failing to acknowledge the empowering and agentic aspects of women’s religious and spiritual lives, in spite of structural injustices, these studies fail to address the complex and multifaceted identities of women (Mahmood, 2005; Vuola, 2017). Simplistic and stereotypical portrayals of women’s religious experiences and monolithic definitions of religion do not give full consideration to the diversity of ways women understand
and construct their religious and spiritual identities (Mishra & Shirazi, 2010; Vuola, 2017). As noted by Mansbridge (1993), “community, in most cases, entails particularity” (p. 359).

This study examines the experiences of five Canadian Roman Catholic feminist women who choose to remain in the church, managing their identities from the inside of the Catholic institution – albeit often on the margins. Because these women are successful leaders in their respective professions who embrace both feminist and Catholic commitments, this groups is especially interesting, considering participants cannot fully participate ministerially in their own church.

Through the approach of lived experience, this study illuminates the multitude of ways each of the women ascribe meaning to their experiences rather than allowing others, religious and secular, to define them. Just as these women refuse to be bound by the constraints of a patriarchal religious system, they resist the categorization of their identities to an unchanging checklist or as an either-or. They construct identities that enable them to move beyond, yet remain actively engaged, by critiquing parts of the tradition with which they disagree and by creatively reworking and remapping a more dynamic and inclusive spirituality. In the “right now,” these women envision the potential for transformation within a church that is not yet ready for them, and they are already innovatively working from within, reimagining the Catholic tradition in a way that resonates with their own experiences and makes sense to both their feminist and spiritual identities. By resisting the binaries and polarities, and by blurring the boundaries of identity, the “it’s yet” – a genuine newness – has the potential to emerge.

Using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) within the interpretive paradigm, this study explores the lived experiences of Canadian Roman Catholic women negotiating feminist and spiritual identities. I used semi-structured interviews with English-speaking feminist
Catholic women in Alberta, Canada, adding to the body of current research exploring the lived experiences of feminist Catholic women in western Canada, which is limited. The insights from this study will raise an awareness and understanding of how feminist Catholic women negotiate seemingly contradictory identities and how their understanding of those identities allows them to not just stay, but to meaningfully engage in a traditional religious institution and work towards the transformation of the church. The study will also provide a more nuanced understanding across all disciplines of the rich and varied natures of Catholic women’s spiritual experiences and identities – particularly relevant and important at a time when Pope Francis is calling for “a stronger presence of women in the church” (Spadaro, 2013).

My primary research question is: How do Canadian Roman Catholic women negotiate feminist and spiritual identities? Each of their narratives were organized into themes and interpreted to explain the phenomenon (Fade, 2004).

The research will be guided by feminist theory. Consideration will be given to amplifying the voices of women, highlighting opportunities for justice, ensuring the research benefits participants, and holding myself accountable to ethics throughout the process (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Feminist research seeks to "create new relationships, better laws, and better institutions" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 175); as such, I view this study as an opportunity to provide a platform for these women’s voices not only to incite change in their church, but to better inform scholarship of the multiplicity of ways religion and spirituality intersect with feminist identities.

Summarizing, the purpose of this study is to understand how Canadian Roman Catholic women negotiate feminist and spiritual identities, and how this negotiated process not only enables them to manage the conflicts around those parts of the tradition with which they disagree, but to engage in a meaningful way. Chapter two provides a literature review that
informs the study. Chapter three discusses the method for this study, interpretive phenomenological analysis; the selection of participants; ethical considerations; and locating the researcher. Chapter four presents the findings and key themes that emerged from the data collection. Four themes are supported by participant narratives. Chapter five presents a correlation between literature and the findings of this study, a conclusion, limitations of the research, and suggestions for future research.

Definitions. Within this paper I use the terms “conservative” and “traditional,” and “liberal” and “pro-change” to delineate ideological differences between Catholics. While I recognize that these terms insinuate dualities and the defining of self by differentiating and comparing, I use them as they allow for continuity with the terms used in current literature. As such, these terms are used very “loosely” and very cautiously, with the understanding that these are not fixed and static categories, and that even if individuals are more aligned with a certain ideology, their identities are not fixed within any particular category.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Since the 1960s, there has been a growing body of literature by scholars and theologians that supports an understanding of how women navigate the tension and challenges as feminists and Catholics when their personal identities conflict with the patriarchal institution (Chittister, 1998; Gervais, 2012; Holtmann, 2008; O’Connor, 2010; Schneiders, 2004). Gervais (2102) notes that much literature produced has studied feminist-Catholic dissonance. This review, however, focuses on literature that explores why feminist women choose to stay committed to Catholicism, even if doing so means navigating from the margins (Ecklund, 2003; Gervais, 2012; Holtmann, 2008; Leming, 2007). The first section, Vatican II, provides a socio-historical and theological context for a study of Catholic women’s identity negotiation. Studies of gender identity
negotiation in religion requires insight into how feminist identities are influenced by, and are at odds with church culture, practices, and doctrine (Ecklund, 2005). Discussion in this section will centre around key reforms of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) and their influence on women and on the climate in the current culture of the church. The second section, feminist theologies: new narratives for women, looks at how feminist theologians are recontextualizing theology to provide new ways of understanding women’s identities. The third section, spirituality and religion, provides an overview of the distinctions and the relationship between the two terms, and the role of both in shaping a feminist Catholic identity. The final section presents a number of studies exploring identity negotiation within religion, along with the strategies feminists and LGBTQ (two groups marginalized by the church) use to manage the conflicts and shape empowering experiences when their identities intersect. Literature presented in all five of these sections has helped refine this research study by providing a framework for answering the question: How do Canadian Roman Catholic women negotiate feminist and spiritual identities?

**Vatican II: Socio-Historical Context for Feminism in the Church**

This section will provide a brief overview of some key reforms of Vatican II and their role in shaping a feminist Catholic identity, as well as how the church is relating to women in the twenty-first century church. “Identities are not created in a vacuum” (Dillon, 1999, p. 13). Literature in this section aims to provide insight into how these reforms, which took place over half a century ago, both continue to create sources of conflict and provide the resources and inspiration for the identity construction of feminist Catholics. It will include a discussion of Vatican II and the ways it allowed for new kinds of participation for women, the continued challenges for women and the ways they have responded, and how women are viewed – and view themselves – in the twenty-first century church.
**Vatican II reforms: Opening a window to the role of women.** Feminist Catholics today come from a tradition where women made important contributions to the church, yet received little recognition for their work. Prior to Vatican II, their identities had been fixed and their roles “passive and subservient vis-à-vis clergy” (Wallace, 1988, p. 25). While the goal of Vatican II aimed to renew the church to make it more relevant to the world, its reforms marked a shift not only in the way the church viewed women, but in the way women understood their Catholic identities (Wallace, 1988). A new vision of Catholicism stressed collaboration between clergy and lay people, and encouraged active participation for all Catholics (Clifford, 2014; Dillon, 1999). With women’s identities now tied to a new sense of church ownership, lay women – including women religious – experienced growing influence at a parish level and assumed leadership roles at local, diocesan, and national levels that had previously been denied to them (Wallace, 1988). The wake from the reforms on today’s church and on Catholic women is notable. Today in North America, women make up the majority of lay ecclesial ministers and are making significant contributions to theological scholarship (Clifford, 2014). A renewal of religious communities saw the identities of women religious become more fluid and ambiguous as a result of increased autonomy, increasingly advanced education levels, more democratic models of religious community, and overall lifestyle changes (Wallace, 1988). Vatican II’s encouragement of a re-evaluation of church norms and personal faith coupled with women’s growing awareness of the power dynamics in the church that had informed their identities, heightened the sense of agency among Catholic women in cultivating their own identities, and opened a window to new possibilities for women in the church.

This new understanding of laity as active participants in their church and their own spiritual lives further resulted in a shift of religious authority away from the institution. Vatican
II reforms afforded Catholics more flexibility with its emphasis on freedom of personal conscience, giving Catholics the right to follow a fully-formed conscience (Dillon, 1999, Baggett, 2009). Armed with this new freedom and agency, Catholics would now understand Catholic tradition “not only through the instruction of church leaders, but also as a result of the contemplation, study, and personal experience of the faithful” (Baggett, 2009, p. 18). With the lines blurring between lay and clerical authority, feminists are confronting their church and exercising their personal agency and authority to embody doctrine as “‘imaginative scripts’ . . . [to] ‘inhabit’ and ‘perform’ in unique ways” (McDougall, n.d., par. 9). Literature is ripe with examples of how pro-change feminist and LGBTQ Catholics draw on the Vatican II teaching of personal conscience as a resource to negotiate identity and navigate the tension to legitimate their rejection of certain church teachings (Dillon, 1999; Gervais, 2011; Leming, 2007; Holtmann, 2015). While scholars – and the church itself – have long drawn on the religious narratives of the institutional church to understand and define women’s religious and spiritual identities, there is, in reality, a multitude of ways “ordinary [Catholics, including feminists,] remember, create, adapt, mix, and share the stories out of which they live” (McGuire, 2016, p. 154).

**Vatican II constraints and feminist dissent.** While gender roles loosened and women achieved a greater presence and sense of independence in the church, institutional power continues to limit women’s empowerment and full-participation, serving as a source of conflict for feminists. The church celebrates men and women for their “equal dignity”; yet the Vatican views its male hierarchy as core to church identity, standing firmly behind its argument that because Jesus selected only male apostles, it does not have the authority to change the institution’s design (Wallace, 1988). Literature (Dillon, 1999; Hilkert, 1993) shows how, by drawing on the inclusive ministry of Jesus, feminists and pro-change Catholics challenge the
argument that defends an all-male priesthood. Further igniting conflict between the Vatican and feminists, the release of Humanae Vitae in 1968 reiterated the church’s traditional teachings on birth control. With a new “freedom of conscience” created by the reforms, many clergy dissented and laity widely ignored the encyclical (Arbuckle, 2013; Dillon, 1999). This mass rejection not only undermined papal authority (Arbuckle, 2013), but “further reinforced the belief of feminist Catholics that the church’s teaching regarding sexuality had little to do with theology” (Miller, 2014). Statistics show that many North American Catholics are in disagreement with, and clearly dissenting from Vatican teachings on issues of moral authority: most consider the church’s position on artificial contraception as irrelevant (Wallace, 1988), 85 percent approve of abortion when a woman’s health is endangered (http://www.catholicsforchoice.org), and a wide majority support same sex marriage (Pew Research, 2017). Despite these escalating numbers, Manning’s (1999) study comparing the views of Catholic women show that positions on moral issues cannot only create divisions between laity and clergy, but also between liberal Catholic women and their more conservative counterparts, the latter maintaining that their view shows loyalty to tradition. In Canada, for example, while the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) issued a commentary in 1968 advising that people’s personal conscience should serve as a moral guide on birth control, the decision was still being opposed by traditional Catholics in 2012 (Lee, 2016). Identity negotiation of feminist Catholics occurs not only when women are at variance with the hierarchy; feminists negotiate understandings of religious authority, differences in the interpretation of religious meanings, and diversity of practices among those with whom they share their pew.

Feminist Catholic women in today’s church: On the threshold? Since 2013, the “theologically flexible” Pope Francis has inspired hope for many pro-change Catholics,
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particularly women, through his efforts to shift the church’s attention from dogma and the
polarizing issues of homosexuality and abortion, to a broader focus that includes social justice,
poverty, and institutional reform (Tenety, 2013). While this raises optimism for feminist Catholic
women seeking reform, Vatican rhetoric around women continues to be steeped in
contradictions. Pope Francis has openly called for greater leadership opportunities for women,
even establishing a commission comprised of equal representation of men and women to explore
women’s ordination to the diaconate (McElwee, 2016). At the same time, however, the Vatican
maintains that females seeking leadership in the priesthood are motivated by the secular “goal of
social advancement” (Paul VI, 1976, section 6), while the male priesthood is the fulfillment of
divine will. More recently, prioritization of gender-based boundaries was made visible at the
Synod on the Family in Rome in 2015 where women were outnumbered 10 to 1 and voting was
restricted to men – clergy and lay (McElwee, 2015; Ponzgratz-Lippitt, 2015). While under Pope
Francis’ leadership, some feminist Catholics are finding more opportunities inside the church for
conversation around the role of women, and they agree that many positive developments have
occurred in other areas with this papacy, they maintain that follow-through is still falling-short
around actual change for women (Case, 2016; Feuerherd, 2018).

As the church grapples with finding the balance between its commitment to tradition and
its need to find relevancy in a post-modern North American society increasingly ambivalent to
religious authority, recent crisis within the church has further eroded its authority. Institutional
authority has been further called to question amidst the church’s sexual abuse crisis (Arbuckle,
2013), as well as in Canada, the Catholic entities’ role in the apprehension of Indigenous
children in residential schools (http://www.trc.ca). While history shows that protesting church
hierarchy’s authority is not something new in times of conflict (Elton, 1963), as women today
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claim ownership of their church and of their identities, these crises are serving as a catalyst for some women to remain in the church, claim their authority, and reshape Catholic culture and identity by working for reform. Calling out “the processes of institutionalization [that] inevitably distort [the] tradition” (Baggett, 2009, p. 95), these Catholics engage in an activism that is inspired by the Christ-centered social justice mandate of their own church (Henderson, 2006). In essence, these Catholics critique the “religion about Jesus” using “the religion of Jesus” (Prothero, 2003, p. 301). Their belief in transformation of their church coupled with an activist stance woven with the identity of Jesus, is central to their Catholic identity.

Some feminist Catholics – along with other Catholics from all walks of life – choose to stay in the church and mobilize collectively, or work individually for change. Pro-change Catholics in Leming’s (2006) study mobilize collectively in response to clergy sexual abuse, “work[ing] toward their goals of supporting victims of clergy abuse, supporting ‘priests of integrity,’ and helping to shape structural change” (p. 58). Leming (2006) links their identity construction to their activism, authority, and agency:

When religious identity is salient, that is, claimed or owned in a way that runs deeper than ascribed identity, and when it propels an individual to act for the simultaneous transformation and transmission of their tradition in ways that engage them at emotional, intellectual and physical levels (heart, head and hands), I propose that this should be understood as exercising religious agency. (p. 59)

Ecklund’s (2005) study illuminates how individual women take an activist stance within their parishes to influence change in the church at both a local and institutional level. Central to their ability to remain committed to the church despite their disagreements is their understanding of their identity as dynamic, fluid, and negotiated; their ability to adapt and interpret teachings and
practices; and their conviction that they can influence church reform in some capacity (Ecklund, 2005). The activism of feminist women leaders in Henderson’s (2006) study who are seeking reform in their religious traditions, is fueled by a feminist spirituality connected to those traditions, as well as their conviction that systems – in and outside the church – have the potential to change. These women leaders counter injustices by fusing their feminism, entrepreneurship, and inclusive spirituality by engaging in, and creating social justice organizations that model moral leadership and a more compassionate vision of religion (Henderson, 2006). Through their agency, along with their willingness to blur the boundaries between their identities, feminist Catholics are able create new expressions of identity that allow them not only to maintain continuity with the Catholic tradition – as well as provide them with needed distance – but to “disrupt [the tradition], reappropriate it, and in doing so produce it anew” (Baggett, 2009, p. 215).

**Feminist Theologies: New Narratives for Women**

To explore feminist identity within the Catholic Church, it is necessary to look at how feminist theologies are reshaping and remapping the landscape of the Catholic tradition. This section will discuss identity and, more specifically feminist identity. It then includes an overview of a feminist approach to theology, including the ways this approach commits to the diverse, plural, and cross-cultural experiences of women.

**Identity and Feminism.** There are different ways of understanding identity. While formerly viewed as fixed and unchanging, identities are now understood as being multiple, fluid, and continually evolving (Arbuckle, 2013). At a personal level, identity refers to the traits people use to understand and define themselves and distinguish themselves from others (Burke, 2003). Social identity refers to a person’s sense of self based on the characteristics that the individual
shares with other members of a particular group(s) (Zucker, 2004). This includes categories such
as a person’s ethnicity, religion, spirituality, and gender, the latter which includes feminist
identity (Zucker, 2004). Scholars have presented a number of different ways to understand
feminist identity. Rhodebeck (1996), for example, distinguished between feminist identity and
feminist opinion. Another approach involved construction of a scale to quantitatively assess
conservatism, liberal, radical, socialist, cultural, and womanist feminism (Henley, Meng,
O’Brien, McCarthy, & Sockloskie, 1998). Based on their findings, Henley et al. (1998)
concluded that there are many feminist perspectives and that there is no one definition that can
encompass all feminism. Exploration of feminist identity in the current study considers that
though all participants can be identified as “feminists,” they may hold different values and ideals
about feminism.

Women’s experience as a source of authority. Much literature (Chittister, 1998;
Fiorenza, 1993; Hilkert, 1993; Schneiders, 2004) exploring the experiences and identities of
women in the Catholic Church in North America does so in the context of feminist theology.
Since the 1960s, the insights of feminist theologians and scholars have opened ways to
destabilize traditional notions of women’s identities in the church (Hilkert, 1993; Schneiders,
2004). They have proposed new ways of understanding Christian identities by challenging the
male-authored and male-centered tradition that considers men’s experience as normative, and
by illuminating the absence of women’s voices and experiences (Hilkert, 1993; Schneiders,
2004). A feminist analysis of theology draws on women’s everyday lives and experiences as a
source for theological reflection (Hilkert, 1993; Schneiders, 2004). Within the Christian
tradition, Holtmann (2008) describes this process as tradition “via scripture, doctrine, and liturgy
enter[ing] into dialogue with women’s experiences [whereby] both the tradition and women’s
experiences are interpreted” (p. 207). While women’s narratives expose the negative effects of parts of the tradition, they are also serving as blueprints for new and more inclusive ways to understand the tradition. By prioritizing the diversity of women’s experiences, for example, feminist theologies challenge the church’s dual anthropology, which emphasizes that natural differences between females and males are part of God’s plan, and is used as a defense by the Vatican to mandate social roles (Dillon, 1999). Feminist theologies propose a model of mutuality that allows for the particularities of individuals rather than predefined assumptions and constructions of gender and social order (O’Neil, 1993). A feminist lens of theology affirms women’s identities by remapping a tradition relevant to all genders and by offering a new way of understanding and experiencing a more life-giving church.

A commitment to difference. A commitment to the varied and diverse experiences of women uncovers the plurality, depth, and differences of women’s identities, including “differences of nationality, race, class, sexuality, and culture” (Rafferty, 2012, p. 192). Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan (2005) approaches women’s experiences from a post-colonial perspective and cautions about universalizing white women’s experiences as the norm in religion. Kwok (2005) argues that “the struggle for gender justice . . . cannot be fought primarily at the cultural-symbolic level, without simultaneously attending to socio-political struggles” (p. 130). Different forms of feminist theologies have emerged to convey the particular personal, geographical, and social locations of women such as mujerista (Latin American and Hispanic), womanist (African), Asian, and queer (Rafferty, 2012), although one must also caution against universalizing women’s experiences within each of these categories. Adding to this theological reflection in Canada are the voices of Aboriginal women who have long been silenced (Leonard, 1990). The fragmentation of these theologies and diversity of approaches highlight the complex,
fluid and intersecting identities of feminist Catholics, and dispel any notion of a universal Catholic woman with a fixed identity (Gebara, 2009).

**Spirituality and Religion**

Both religion and spirituality are woven into the identities of feminists who remain committed to participating in a religious institution and those who locate themselves apart or separate from a church or institution (Schneiders, 2003). This section explores the relationship between the two terms, including the tension and the mutuality when the two intersect.

**Perceptions of incompatibility.** Perceptions of spirituality and religion have led to the assumption that religion and a feminist spirituality are incompatible (Schneiders, 2003). Feminism in North America has, for the most part, been favourable to spirituality, while either dismissing religion in the study of women’s identities, or presenting it negatively (Aune, 2015). North Americans generally view religion and spirituality as distinct, even in conflict with one another, due in part to overarching perceptions of the two terms (Schneiders, 2003). Religion is commonly associated with formal institutions, shared beliefs and practices, and obligations, and sometimes associated with oppression and lack of agency (Schneiders, 2003). Spirituality, on the other hand is usually understood as less institutional, allowing for more personal autonomy (Reimer-Kirkham, 2009). While some feminist spiritualities are associated with religion, others are not (Schneiders, 2003). The focus of this study is on a feminist spirituality that shares a mutuality with religion.

**Possibilities in partnership.** While feminist theologians and scholars do not dismiss that tension can exist between spirituality and religion, many assert that religion cannot be dismissed as an important influence in feminist identity, as collaboration between spirituality and religion is not only possible, but fruitful (Chittister, 2004; Schneiders, 2003; Schneiders, 2004). Schneiders
Schneiders (2003) makes the argument for the union of spirituality and religion in a Catholic setting by making the distinction between the practices and beliefs systems of religion, and religion as “the institution.” Schneiders (2003) maintains that the institutionalization of religion can offer a shared belief system, coherency, and sound formation of beliefs and values; the opportunity to draw wisdom and criticism from its historical context; a support system; and a responsibility to the greater good of others. It becomes destructive, however, when the institution is exclusive, oppressive, and legalistic (Schneiders, 2003). Spirituality is conscious, grounded in experience and positive values, and holistic in that it involves the totality of oneself; however, it too, can become destructive when it becomes self-centred (Schneiders, 2003). Schneiders (2003) argues that a healthy symbiosis occurs between religion and spirituality when religion is grounded in a lived spirituality, spirituality is immersed within the religious tradition and community, and one “sit[s] lightly to the institution” (Schneiders, 2003, p. 177). Studies highlight different ways feminists negotiate spirituality and religion while “sitting lightly” to the religious institution. Feminists in Aune’s (2015) study disassociated with the church but continue to fuse religion with spirituality by incorporating elements of religion in their everyday lives. She labels this type of feminist spirituality as “de-churched” (Aune, 2015, p. 129) to explain that disassociation from the institution does not mean being disassociated from the tradition. Feminist Catholic women religious (nuns) in Gervais’ (2012) Canadian study, on the other hand, remain engaged with the institution by differentiating between their feminist spirituality and the gender injustices of their religion. Literature shows that being a feminist does not necessarily lead to disassociation with religion, nor is being spiritual incompatible with religion, but that a wide range of expressions within religious and spiritual traditions suggest there is much variation in the meaning feminists apply to their experience of both.
Resisting a Label: The Many Faces of Women’s Religious/Spiritual Feminist Identities

This section presents a review of some of the existing works of scholars, including Canadians, that explore gender identity negotiation within religion. The research discusses different ways scholars have approached and examined the subject, offering a foundation from which to focus the current study.

Ecklund (2005) studied three types of Catholic women to glean an understanding of what types of identities are more likely to remain committed to patriarchal religions, to compare the different ways women respond to religious constraints, and to uncover how some women can find satisfaction within the church that conflicts with their feminist convictions. Her study explored women “who agree with Church doctrines, those who disagree and leave the Church, and those who disagree and remain loyal to Catholicism” (Ecklund, 2005, p. 140). Women who were more traditional, constructed identities by remaining loyal for the most part to tradition and advocating for the status quo with respect to women in leadership (Ecklund, 2005). Women who left the church did so because of disagreements over teachings and doctrine (Ecklund, 2005). Notably, like the traditional Catholic women, many who had left felt that “being Catholic” meant adhering to all church teachings; they left because they were unable to do so. Women in the third group, those who held strong disagreements with many Catholic doctrines but remained in the church, did so by managing the conflict in two ways: by their agency in personally deciding which doctrines to believe in and by choosing to engage in parish roles that were meaningful to them (Ecklund, 2005). Ecklund’s (2005) findings also highlighted that women who felt they had agency in “choosing the content of Catholic identity” (p. 146) despite disagreeing with their church, were more apt to feel connected to the institution. This study offers insight into women’s different interpretations of authority and how those influence identity construction.
Other studies (Ecklund, 2006; Fuist, 2016) have focused on understanding the connections between one’s religious and spiritual identity, and the context in which the individual practices. Dillon (1999) asserts that identity is influenced by “a particular historical, cultural, and institutional context” (p. 13). Feminist and LGBTQ participants in Dillon’s (1999) study maintained Catholic identities and reduced the conflict they experienced through their interpretation of doctrine and their involvement in religious groups outside the church that support LGBT rights, reproductive rights, and women’s ordination – all counter to official church teaching. Fuist (2016) explored the lived experiences of individuals who are members of LGBT-religious groups and concurred that different social contexts provide different cultural resources that can either constrain or enable how LGBT religious identity is understood and lived out. Similarly, in Ecklund’s (2006) study of conservative and liberal Catholic parishes, the autonomy of women was shaped by the culture of their parish and how the parish priest interpreted his own role. This study is particularly relevant in exploring context as, within the Catholic Church, most individuals experience their faith within the parish setting (D’Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Meyer, 2001). Ecklund (2006) concluded that women in progressive parishes with priests that gave power and decision-making roles to women felt they had more influence within the church. These findings are important to the current study since participants are situated in different locations and engaged within different areas of the Catholic institution, and will thus be influenced by different Catholic cultures and resources.

Schneiders (2004) coined the terms “feminist Catholics” and “Catholic feminists” to distinguish women’s understandings of feminist and Catholic identities and to understand whether feminism can be an alternative way of practising Christianity, or is, in fact, an “alternative to Christianity” (p. iii). Feminist Catholics seek reform from patriarchy and gender
marginalization as activists within the institution (Schneiders, 2004). They forge new identities by remaining connected to the institution, yet shape a spirituality committed to a more inclusive church by seeking out resources and spiritual direction that nourish their feminist values, by participating in pro-change groups outside the church, and by actively engaging in committees and ministries within the church to influence a more egalitarian and inclusive agenda (Schneiders, 2004). Catholic feminists are those who oppose patriarchy, see no value in trying to reform the church, and are shaping new practices and rituals outside the institution through participation in “Womenchurch,” which are women-led celebrations based on an inclusive and non-hierarchical feminist model of leadership and worship (Schneiders, 2004). These women identify as feminist before Catholic, though they continue to identify somewhat with parts of the tradition that are meaningful and align with their values. Gervais (2012) borrowed Schneider’s terms in her study of women religious in Ontario. While the categories were helpful in making sense of the positive and negative aspects of Catholicism, both Schneiders (2004) and Gervais (2012) suggest that Catholic women’s identities may not neatly fit into one or the other category. For example, though one woman in Gervais’ (2012) study appeared to be a feminist Catholic by her very place in the institution as a nun, her participation in feminist celebrations outside the church rather than attending Mass identify her as a Catholic feminist. Gervais’ findings raise insights around monolithic assumptions about women’s participation in religious institutions and invite a closer look into their personal religious and spiritual practices.

A number of studies of identity negotiation among feminists and LGBTQ in traditional religions highlighted the cognitive and behavioural strategies individuals used to negotiate gender identity (Dillon, 1999; Gervais, 2012; Holtmann, 2008; Leming, 2007; Manning, 1999; Mishra & Shirazi, 2010). Leming (2007) used the term religious agency to describe how some
Catholic women in her study engaged in less visible forms of identity negotiation strategies such as changing the ritual language during the Mass and employing strategic silence to avoid using language they disagreed with. Winter, Lumis, and Stokes (1995) found that to address feelings of exclusion and find empowerment, feminists who chose to remain in the church employed strategies of “defecting in place,” such as participating in women’s spiritual groups that involve practicing alternative feminist rituals, reimagining a more feminine image of the Divine, and participating in ministerial leadership to put a “female face to participation” (p. 115). Ozarak’s (1996) research shows how feminists negotiate identity in the church by openly confronting inequalities and trying to make changes, such as requesting gender-inclusive language. Manning’s (1999) study of traditional Christian and Orthodox Jewish women suggests that some women negotiate traditional religion by compartmentalizing their different identities, holding traditional identities in their worship space and feminist identities in the workplace. Women in Holtmann’s study (2008), however, experienced no separation between their secular and faith lives. Other studies showed how gay Catholic men (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016) and Muslim and Catholic feminists (Ali, Mahmood, Moel, Hudson & Leathers, 2008) negotiate identity by focusing on the positive aspects of their religion. Literature (Gervais, 2011; Gervais, 2012; Holtmann, 2008; Holtmann, 2015) also shows that a common strategy used by women as a way to be Catholic and feminist is to focus their efforts on social justice initiatives. While these works may appear to be secular activities, they are forms of religious agency lived out in everyday life (Holtmann, 2015). Many strategies and forms of religious agency employed by individuals in the above studies are more internal or subtle, and not visible to others, leading to possible assumptions that all Catholic women participating in religion hold traditional and fixed identities (Ecklund, 2005).
Furthering the discussion on identity negotiation, religious scholars are beginning to draw on Homi Bhabha’s (1994) post-colonial theory of third space to explore creative approaches to the construction of women’s religious and spiritual identities as a result of cultural interactions. Third space is a place of tension and innovation (English, 2004) and a place of collaboration and contestation (Bhabha, 1994). The theory allows for multiplicity and discord within an identity, and posits that when different, often contradictory cultures meet, identities are reconstructed and are constantly in flux through the continuous interweaving of elements of both cultures (English, 2004; Todd, 1997). Mishra and Shirazi’s (2010) research explores the complex and hybrid identities of young Canadian Muslim women who, post-911, continually negotiate identity by choosing to apply different meanings to Islam, dependent on the situation. In another Canadian study (English, 2004), feminist Catholic international adult educators resist monolithic stereotypes of identity by finding a middle ground that embraces difference, accepting that sometimes their identities will be more closely aligned with the institution while at other times less affiliated, and that sometimes they will be more open about their religious affiliation while other times not. These activists negotiate identity as “fluid and non-static” (English, 2004, p. 97). By choosing to maintain their religious and feminist identities and by remaining open to the possibilities that arise from the tension and ambiguities between two cultures, these feminist global activists are able to resist essentialist labels and be more effective in their work.

Summary

The content of this study builds upon an existing body of research exploring how Catholic women negotiate feminist and spiritual identities. To provide perspective and context to this research, this review provided an overview of Catholic teachings, doctrines, and perspectives since the major reforms of the church at Vatican II. Literature revealed that Vatican II reforms
began a trajectory of women’s participation in the church, with women in great numbers taking up leadership and decision-making roles in the church. While these reforms continue to shape how women envision and live out their Catholic identity in the church and in the world, identity conflict arises as the church continues to limit women’s full-participation. Feminist Catholic women who choose to stay in the church innovatively draw on their own authority and on Catholic doctrine and teachings to challenge, critique, reimagine, and reshape the tradition in a way that aligns with their feminist identities and enables them to have meaningful and life-giving experiences. This does not, however, remove the challenges, marginalization, and limitations they face. Women also draw on the ethics and principles of feminist theologies to challenge the exclusivity and inequities of the church, and to creatively reshape and reimagine new kinds of practices and beliefs while remaining within the tradition. Feminist Catholic women prioritize embodying their spirituality and are less concerned with theory and correct doctrine (Holtmann, 2008). By understanding their identities as fluid, dynamic, and negotiable, even amidst tension and conflict, feminists are constructing a multitude of ways to be Catholic that reach beyond Catholic doctrine and teachings. Through their patience, efforts, and commitment, they are slowly transforming parts of the tradition.

Chapter Three: Method

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of Canadian Roman Catholic women navigating feminist and spiritual identities. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), I conducted an in-depth exploration of women’s lived experiences and how they are making sense of those experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA combines ideas from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009).
IPA is phenomenological in that it explores the individuals’ lived experiences and focuses on “an individual’s perception or account of an object or event” (Smith & Osborne, 2008, p. 53). It is interpretive in that it brings the researcher’s personal beliefs into the process by acknowledging that understanding requires interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). IPA employs a double hermeneutic: Empathic hermeneutics understands an experience from a participant’s point of view, while critical hermeneutics involves “stand[ing] alongside the participant, to take a look at them from a different angle, to ask questions. . . . " (Smith et al., 2009, p. 36) and to break down their experiences into meaningful critiques.

IPA is also effective for this study in that it relies on ideography by exploring each specific case. IPA looks in-depth at individual’s unique lived experiences but also allows for determining themes across participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The themes generated in the analysis highlight participants’ distinct voices, showing both similarities and differences, and making it possible to make specific statements about the individual (Smith & Osborne, 2008). This approach highly respects the diversity of women’s spiritual, religious, and feminist experiences, while speaking to their solidarity.

Feminist theory provides a complementary foundation for this study. While there are many types of feminisms and there is no one type of feminist research, feminists share a commitment to improving women’s lives and statuses (DeVault, 1996). This mode of inquiry grew out of the feminist movement, which illuminated the silencing, suppression, and distortion of women’s voices; the tendency to universalize the experience of men (as well as privileged women); and the ideologies and systems that made so many of those lives invisible (DeVault, 1996). By capturing women’s lived experiences ethically and respectfully, feminist research legitimizes women’s voices as sources of knowledge (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). It values
process as well as outcomes, aiming to bring to the surface voices that are excluded from knowledge production, and critically reflecting upon ways to bring about change to affect those forces that oppress or dismiss these voices (DeVault, 1996; Hesse-Biber, 2012). In doing so, however, feminist research cautions against merely examining how women differ from men, as this would imply that all women are alike. Conscientious feminist researchers are committed to the plurality of women’s experiences, and to differences of gender, ethnicity, and class (Hesse-Biber, 2012). In the field of theology, for example, women’s voices have been muted due to gender, colour, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and age (Schneiders, 2004). With its openness to new forms of knowledge production, its attention to difference, and its commitment to change, feminist research fuses theory with action and activism.

An important element of feminist research is its transformational potential. While most feminist research aims to identify the ways in which various forms of inequality and oppression impact women’s lives, the methodology seeks to go beyond mere contemplation of women’s experiences (DeVault, 1996). Sharing a commitment to change with other critical traditions, feminist research seeks the empowerment of women, as well as change to the systems that marginalize and control them, including the way they are studied (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; DeVault, 1996). Different feminist ideologies advocate for distinct approaches to social change (DeVault, 1996). As well, feminist research also differs in how it defines change within the research process, with options ranging from “changing theory or bringing in new topics into the discipline, to consciousness-raising or decolonization (for the researcher, the reader, or participants in the research), to producing data that will stimulate or support political action or policy decisions” (DeVault, 1996). Assessing whether system change has taken place has proven to be a difficult task for feminist researchers (DeVault, 1996). While differences exist in
approaches, and all change does not always translate into society-wide transformation, these changes share a goal of challenging society, as well as creating opportunities to consider, act upon, and search for alternatives to the ideologies and systems that dominate others (De Vault, 1996). As such, feminist theory, combined with IPA, provides an important and effective platform for the diversity of participants’ voices to emerge and to be understood and affirmed, and for their voices to inspire and inform insights and action that can change power relations and structures of inequality.

**Exploratory Question**

The research questions asked in IPA are framed broadly to invite exploration into how participants perceive their situation (Smith et al., 2009). To begin, participants were asked: As a Roman Catholic woman, how do you negotiate your feminist and spiritual identities? In this study, feminist, defined through a feminist lens, is not necessarily wearing the label of “feminist,” but being conscious of issues of gender equality and how gender intersects with other areas of oppression among women.

**Participant Selection and Data Gathering**

The participants were chosen using a matching selection process and purposive sampling to find respondents who had experience with the phenomenon being studied. Participants with the following characteristics were sought for this research: (a) English-speaking Roman Catholic women actively engaged in the Catholic Church; (b) willingness to speak about their experience of being a feminist Catholic; (c) age 40 or over; (d) currently residing in Alberta, Canada; (e) and identifying as leaders in their professions.

Mindful that feminism takes on many different forms and meanings, I refrained from restricting participants to a particular definition of feminism. My criteria only required that they
identify as having gender-based challenges or disagreements with some teachings in the Catholic Church. While initially I opened my study to younger women, in the process of engaging volunteers, I limited participation to women age 40 and over. This decision was made because IPA requires a small homogenous sample size and because the early experiences of this age group reflect the period around Vatican II, when “a new social reality” (Wallace, 1988, p. 24) for women opened up in the church. The province of Alberta was selected due to proximity to the researcher and because limited research exists exploring the lived experiences of Catholic women in western Canada. Women in leadership roles was listed as criterion, as I aimed to understand how participants’ workplace professional leadership roles intersected with their feminist and Catholic identities.

Smith et al. (2009) suggest typical sample sizes of three to six participants for student IPA studies. IPA is conducted on small, fairly homogenous sample sizes; it is the quality rather than the quantity of data that permits insightful analyses (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were recruited through referral from others, as well as opportunities through researcher contacts. Pseudonyms have been employed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and to help readers connect more meaningfully with participants.

IPA acknowledges that the researcher is the primary instrument in acquiring rich, detailed personal accounts of the experiences being studied (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher’s biases and beliefs are not to be set aside but are necessary in order to make sense of the individual’s experiences (Fade, 2004). Data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, recorded on audio, transcribed, then analyzed. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2005) note that in-depth interviews are particularly valuable for accessing the voices and the knowledge of those who are marginalized. The interviews were driven by open-ended questions, providing
participants with flexibility and spontaneity in their responses. Field notes of participants’ posture, facial expressions, and body language assisted with the interpretive process (Fade, 2004).

After speaking with potential participants by telephone, individuals were emailed a written invitation and description of the research. Upon stating their willingness to participate, I sent each individual a copy of the letter of consent outlining the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the right to withdraw. This information was reviewed with participants at the beginning of each session and prior to them signing their consent forms, giving them an opportunity to ask questions. Interviews lasted approximately one hour to one-and-a-half hours. Questions asked included: How do you understand your commitment to and/or dissatisfaction with Catholic beliefs, practices, and tradition? What strategies do you use to manage the conflicts? How do you understand the dynamics between your feminist and spiritual identities and your professional role in a leadership capacity? I followed-up with three participants via email shortly after the interview to clarify a few comments I was unsure about or could not hear clearly in the recording.

Data Analysis and Presentation

While literature shows there is no single way of doing IPA, each case must be analyzed in detail prior to commencing the next interview (Smith & Osborne, 2008). To begin the analytical process, I read the first transcript through several times. After multiple readings and a close line by line analysis and starting to ask questions about deeper meaning in the data, I developed emergent themes that were quite broad. At this stage I moved from a descriptive nature to an interpretive nature, continuing to ensure that themes were supported by participant narratives. This next step looked for connections between the themes in order to cluster them
together into overarching super-ordinate themes. Sub-themes were linked to super-ordinate themes. This process was carried out with each case. Once the cases were complete, a master list of themes was developed and narrative accounts were written up under each theme. During this process, themes were refined and removed.

Starks and Trinidad (2007) suggest that after reading the study, the research should engage the reader in such a way that should feel they have experienced the phenomenon. As much as possible, I have retained the integrity of the narratives by limiting the editing and summarizing of participant quotes. This is my attempt to counterbalance my power as researcher. This approach empowers participants by amplifying their own voices in their own words, while also empowering readers to engage in the process of data interpretation (Smith et al., 2009)

**Researcher Ethics**

Researcher ethics is at the forefront in IPA. In the data gathering stage, Smith et al. (2009) state that IPA “requires rich data” so that “participants should have been granted an opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflexively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length” (p. 56). In the analysis stage, researchers must make decisions around the coding and categorizations of the data, using rigour in the approach, and “engag[ing] with the analysis as a faithful witness to the accounts in the data” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1376). While a power dynamic is inherent in the relationship between a researcher and participant, I sought to share my power with participants in a number of ways. Firstly, participants were invited to select their preferred location for the interviews. Secondly, as IPA requires the researcher to be an active participant in the creation of meaning, prior to each interview I discussed my role and the interpretive nature of the study with each participant. Thirdly, I aimed to establish a space of collaboration and dialogue throughout the process by inviting participants to read their transcripts; consulting them on my analysis and key themes
derived from their narratives; and inviting their comments and feedback. This process, referred to as internal validation, invites further collaboration into the research process (Liamputtong, 2011; Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Ethics is also at the heart of feminist research as it aims to provide a caring and non-hierarchical research environment and seeks to empower the research participants (Liamputtong, 2011). Religion and spirituality are deeply personal topics that can – and did – incite a range of emotions, both positive and painful. Sensitivity and attentiveness to participants was a priority. During the interviews, if necessary, I stopped the interview to allow for a break. Participants were reminded that they could terminate the interview at any time.

As one of the women in my study identified as Métis, prior to commencing the interview, I discussed my positionality with her. I acknowledged that while I recognized we shared a Roman Catholic faith, I have limited understanding of Indigenous world views – the source of this limited understanding being the Eurocentric lens through which I see and understand my world. Throughout the entire research process, I continually engaged in self-reflexivity (Finlay, 2002) as a way to understand myself so I could be open to learning and understanding, while remaining cognizant of the limitations created by my own cultural perspectives.

**Locating the Researcher**

To honour feminist and IPA ethics, as well as my participants and the readers, it is important to locate and acknowledge how my positionality has influenced this study (Hesse-Biber, 2012). “Feminist methodologies challenge all social scientists to explore the process of research in more depth, to locate all facets of researchers’ identities – values, beliefs, and emotions – within the research context. Moreover, this articulation of self must be made public” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 788). My values and beliefs have influenced the development of
research questions, the gathering of data, the way the findings are interpreted, and ultimately my findings (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Understanding how my biases have influenced the research process and study findings allows for greater transparency.

I am a married Caucasian Catholic woman with French and English origins who grew up in Alberta, Canada and who identifies as a feminist. I am grounded in my Catholic faith, but I work within an anti-patriarchal framework. My inspiration in sharing the narratives of these five women is my desire to further the interests of religious and spiritual women “as subjects and agents of transformation, not occasions for theological debate” (Holmes, 2013, p. 9). I am currently a practicing Catholic, and I believe my status as a Catholic woman served to facilitate the interview process. For example, when participants made reference to terms like “the Trinity” or “liturgy,” I was familiar with the terminology and did not have to stop the interview to ask for clarification. As I listened to participants talk about their experiences within the church, I was able to visualize the space and the ritual, inviting a better appreciation of the context of their experiences. I believe that this also helped established a more comfortable rapport with participants, as we shared common ground (Forbes, 2001) as Catholic women.

I believe that religious reform and working against the distortion of the Catholic tradition can be very effective when addressed from within. Like Rohr (2018), I maintain that “if we think we can say our private prayers and still genuflect before the self-perpetuating, unjust systems of this world, our conversion will not go very deep or aid in the unfolding of history.” I readily admit this research project was learning through activism (DeVault, 1996). Knowledge is power, as such, I aim to uncover the many ways women are both marginalized and empowered, and how they empower themselves as Catholics and feminists. In doing so, I hope to inspire change that deconstructs the barriers that diminish, dismiss, and limit women, as well illuminate the many
ways women are living their vision and “demanding that religion itself be called to its best” (Chittister, 2004, p. 134).

Culliford (2011) asserts that “it is hard to study spirituality without addressing one’s own spiritual development” (p. 13). Most certainly, during this research I was acted on, as well as acting. While my work with the participants and providing this platform for them to tell their stories can influence their lives and the lives of others, their narratives have influenced my own life and identities. This research project compelled me to peel back the layers of my own relationship with my church and look more closely at the strands that make up my own spiritual and feminist identities. Throughout the process, I have grown more intentional and cognizant of the factors influencing my own spiritual and feminist identities, as well as my potential to effect reform of the structures and ideologies that limit and diminish women both in and outside the church.

I am a member of a pro-change group that seeks renewal in the Catholic Church and focuses on social justice for women and marginalized people both inside the church and in society. The members inspire and support me with their prayerful and activist wisdom, their informed inquiry, and a commitment to a vision of a church and society that is faithful to the ministry of Jesus. I also belong to a progressive and inclusive parish community that is affirming of my intellectual and spiritual agency and, in many ways, anchors me to the best in myself. I am, however, heavily weighted by the ways that I and other women throughout the global Catholic Church are marginalized by the institution – a weight that seeps into my regular parish experience – including the androcentric biases in the tradition, the boundaries set by the system’s exclusionary policies and teachings, and the misuse and abuse of privilege and power.
If real reform in the church is to occur, the church requires the minds, hands, and emerging insights of all genders working together in new ways – as equals – to address old and existing problems and new challenges. It also requires the new brand of moral leadership that women in the church are already so adeptly demonstrating can break down hierarchical structures and transform the dominant culture by influencing a culture of equals and inclusivity (English, 2004; Wallace, 1993). I maintain, however, that until women are accepted as full-participants in all capacities and roles in the church, speaking in their own voices, and articulating their own needs, priorities and concerns, a culture of subordination will continue and the Spirit will be unable to emerge in its fullness. I borrow from the thoughts of Joan Chittister (2004) when she says that it is only when women – and I add to that all genders – are free to develop as fully as men, will we all come to the “fullness [of life], both together and alone” (p. 164).

The five female participants in my study have deeply influenced my own thinking and beliefs, inspiring and informing me in a way that allows me to more critically and constructively engage with the tradition. Their narratives and experiences, which so richly illuminate their commitment to their feminist ideals, as well as the depth of their spirituality, have opened up to me new ways to align myself with God that respect both my feminist and spiritual identities. To honour feminist research and keep the focus on participants’ experiences (Bergen, 1996), the next chapter provides a platform for the narratives and insights of these five participants.

Chapter Four: Findings

Semi-structured interviews generated rich and detailed accounts of the experiences of five Catholic women navigating feminist and spiritual identities. This chapter presents the findings of my analysis of the narratives of five Catholic women in seeking to answer the
question: How do Canadian Catholic women negotiate feminist and spiritual identities? Four themes emerged from the analysis: shaping her feminist and spiritual identities – early years; conflict and constraint: empowered by an adaptive sense of self; embracing the wisdom (through her lens); and, the medium is the message: feminist spirit embodied. Themes, and their multiple sub-themes, are supported by verbatim excerpts from the participants along with the researcher’s interpretation. These themes are meant to reveal the meanings that best represent the women’s experiences of navigating feminist and spiritual identities.

Participant Introductions

The following section presents a brief introduction of each participant. All participants were born in Canada, though currently reside in Alberta, and were baptized Catholic as infants. Two are executives, two are business owners, one is in a leadership role in her workplace, and four are directors on boards. Pseudonyms are used to respect their confidentiality and each participant had the final word on how much detail she wished to include in her description. Recognizing that post-modernism invites multiple understandings of feminism, like other researchers studying feminist Catholic identity negotiation (Ecklund, 2003; Gervais, 2012), I asked the participants whether they define themselves as a feminist and invited them to share their understanding of the term. Three of the five participants firmly identified as feminists. While Kim is not opposed to feminism, she chooses not to self-label as a feminist. Maria supports feminism but is “not comfortable with the term” because she finds it divisive. All participants, however, share a strong feminist ethic of liberation, equality, and justice. What is consistent throughout the women’s narratives is that while they recognize and openly name the systemic marginalization of women in the church and in society, they also prioritize creating a more just, fair, and equitable world for all genders. As such, for the purposes of this study, I am
comfortable naming all participants as feminists. (See Appendix A for participant definitions of feminism.)

Laurie is Caucasian, single, and 51 years old. She holds a graduate degree and is employed in human services.

Anne is Métis, married, and 51 years old. She holds a bachelor’s degree and is employed in human services.

Kim is Caucasian, married, and 54 years old. She holds a graduate degree and is employed in healthcare.

Maria is Caucasian, married, and 55 years old. She holds a bachelor’s degree and is employed in business.

Bronwyn is Caucasian, married, and 59 years old. She holds a bachelor’s degree and is employed in healthcare.

**Key Themes**

**Shaping Her Feminist and Spiritual Identities – Early Years**

This theme discusses the origins of the participants’ identity construction and highlights the influences of early experiences from their childhood to young adulthood. Participant narratives revealed three themes relevant to early experiences: influence of family, influence of church (parish) culture, and choosing to negotiate.

**Influence of family.** Family played a primary role in shaping all participants’ feminist spiritual identities. Particularly notable among all five participants was the influence of female relations. All but one participant attributed their mother as the primary parent involved in their spiritual upbringing. Maria, for example, reflected on the paradox of women in her family driving the faith, considering the hierarchical structure of the church, with male clergy at the top.
As she talks, she seems to have a growing awareness of how her spiritual experience is woven into her family life, in particular the women in her family:

Really, the strong faith that I have comes through the women in the family. . . . The women are the solid force that have always been there. It was my mother, grandmothers, aunts. . . . And I think that is very strange considering the hierarchical nature. Which leads me to believe that there's more to it than just the church, that there's a much broader perspective of religion that flows through the women to their children.

Similarly, Kim’s mother laid the groundwork for learning how to reconcile conflicting identities. Kim explained: “My mom played a big role in bringing us [kids] up Catholic.” It was also her mom that encouraged Kim to challenge inequities and discrimination in the church that she would face as a young woman. Said Kim: “[Mom] was not afraid to challenge. When I was struggling with the issues in the church she would tell me, ‘Talk to someone higher up.’”

Laurie described her family’s early connection with her church: “[We] were very connected to the church, but not in a way that I found oppressive. . . . There were clear gender differences . . . that I'm suspecting were a generational thing.” She attributed her family as the lens through which she interpreted her experience of Catholicism as a youth:

When I was growing up in the church, my familial experience really coloured the way I understood all these things. I was fine with the way the world was because I wasn't in any way told, “You can do this, but you can't do that.” And it didn't enter my consciousness.

Anne said her Catholic faith is a “gift given to me by my mother” because her father was not Catholic. Her spiritual identity is intricately woven with the experience of her ancestors:

What I know is that . . . my Aboriginal side of the family was Roman Catholic . . . [and] there was always this deep respect and understanding that this is our faith, that we are
Indigenous people, and that we have other practices as well, but they fit together in our worldview. [My grandmother] would share with us her stories and experiences of residential school and being removed from her home. And I knew the truth . . . , so in my way of thinking, I am a combination of all of that.

Brownyn developed a strong feminist ethic early in her life, due to a great extent from her family experiences and navigating an abusive home:

My mom tells me I always had a strong sense of justice, even as a kid. . . . Mom had left an abusive relationship when I about three so we were very much, you know, a woman's household, Mom and I. And that men had power in the world and in the church was pretty evident to both of us.

**Influence of church (parish) culture.** The culture of their local parishes was an important influence in the identity formation of the participants. Most participants spoke of having an awareness of gender restrictions in the church as children, though their experiences varied. As a child, Maria was aware of those differences, but felt indifferent to being excluded from the altar: “[I'd] always known . . . I could not be an altar server. But that was also something I wasn't attracted to anyway.” As a youth and young adult, she became an influential voice in her parishes, which she attributed to nuns whom she viewed as “equal partners on the worship team who were very strong and very faithful women,” and to liberal priests who “listened and sought my opinions and . . . made me feel valued, that I was making a difference, and that my opinion mattered.”

Anne related how her spiritual identity was stamped by the ethos of the church in the wake of Vatican II. She spoke of “really interesting times in the Church,” “girl power,” and breaking through gender barriers: “I was invited to be an altar girl. . . . And I remember that as
being an invitation to join what had been an exclusive boy’s club.” Anne’s parish also provided a “sense of belonging,” as it served as a refuge from an abusive and alcoholic father: “Church was a safe place growing up. . . . [It] was very peaceful, and the people in our church community were very loving and supportive.”

Bronwyn’s early parish experience also shaped a feminist ethic, though her experience was one of being on the margins of the community. Describing herself as “not really fitting in,” she explained: “Mom was a divorced woman who left because of abuse, who was told by her priest to go back to a physically abusive man . . . [and] was largely shunned by her church community. As she spoke of the stigma she felt and the agency it ignited, she created an image of both standing apart from her Catholic identity and entering it: “It made me a bit rebellious from day one because I didn't feel at home or welcome in my church. Now I recognize that there’s good things here, there's wisdom here, there’s community here.”

Choosing to negotiate. All participants experienced at different times in their early years a consciousness-raising experience – a very personal and intense awareness of their conflict with the church. These experiences are at the root of their identity conflict and formation.

Though Bronwyn had been affected by gender injustices in and outside the church early in her life, due to the marginalization and judgement her mother experienced upon leaving her abusive father, she attributes two positive incidents she had as a young woman to what she coined “waking up.” The first was being inspired by the engagement of women in the church, which helped her see a vision of church of women actively shaping their faith experience: “I just woke up more when I saw all the good things that women have done in the church.” The second was the hospitality extended by a priest at a church she was visiting that left her with a profound “experience of welcoming.” Though she was no longer a practicing Catholic, these experiences
drew her back to the church. Maria also experienced judgement and barriers. Her parish priest would not marry her in the church because of her husband’s marital and religious background. She navigated the barrier by seeking the help of a friend, a priest in another parish, who told her, “This is so wrong. There are ways around this.”

Laurie spoke of gaining “insight” as a student of theology in a Catholic institution: “Once you have insight, there's no turning back. You can’t, you know, say ‘Oh, I didn't see that,’ without compromising yourself.” Her theological insights and personal experiences made it increasingly difficult to reconcile church teachings that did not respect her intellect, feminism, and personal values. During our interview she shared her experience of sexual harassment within the Catholic institution:

A lot of my reaction as a feminist to the world came out of those experiences. . . . I have to say the sexism, the misogyny, the patriarchy, the sexual harassment, the – you know – it informs my work for sure, but it informs me as a feminist.

Laurie further reflected on reaching a juncture and having to decide whether or not she would remain in the church: “I took a lot of time . . . weighing the pros and cons.”

The Indigenous and Catholic spiritual strands shaping Anne’s identity heightened her awareness of the patriarchal nature of the Catholic structure from an early age:

I knew there was a hierarchy. . . . I wasn't too concerned, knowing it was very traditional, because in our native spiritual practices, we have male as well as female elders, and they have different roles. They are allowed to do certain practices, are given certain authority and power, and are more like equals. I saw two different systems . . . , [but] because it was really important to be part of the church, I was like, "Ok, my role will be limited.”
Summary: Shaping her feminist and spiritual identities – early years. This section draws attention to the importance of strong feminist role models in instilling the values and confidence in women navigating patriarchal cultures and systems – whether that be in the church or in the larger society. The narratives show that these women continue to draw on these early lessons and examples from female family members as they manage conflict. The narratives also highlight a very different experience of church for each one of them and the influence of that experience on their identity formation. Both positive and negative early experiences in the church inspired their feminist ethic. All of these early experiences played a significant role in women’s discernment process as they decided to stay and negotiate their feminist and spiritual identities from within the institution. Sifting through all of these experiences, participants maintain spiritual and feminist identities by very consciously finding ways to separate (though not ignore) the harmful experiences from those that are growthful and empowering.

Conflict and Constraint: Empowered by an Adaptive Sense of Self

Being a Catholic and being a feminist means that church can be a place of conflict and constraint. The participants continually adapt to the tension by constructing a vision of their church that is egalitarian and inclusive; challenging the status quo; deliberately and innovatively experimenting with rituals, teachings, and symbols; and seeking support and insights through community. Their agency and activism come to light when their faith and feminism intersect, and they navigate using the following strategies: articulating a vision; behaviours; presence (visibility, invisibility); and (re)locating and (re)discovery. (Re)locating and (re)discovery has two subthemes: communities of discernment in her traditions and communities of discernment in difference.
Articulating a vision. Participants articulated a vision of church that respects diversity, creativity, flexibility, and inclusivity. Maria and Anne talked about creativity and personal interpretation within Catholicism. Said Maria: “I think it is important for us to realize that Catholicism is a practice, and there are a lot of different ways of practicing your Catholicism.” Anne spoke of the role of both feminism and God in her free will and the freedom she gives herself in interpreting a more meaningful Catholic experience. She explained: “Being a feminist means people always need to know their choices so they can make their own decisions because of free will. That goes back to one of my core beliefs: I believe God gives us free will.”

For Kim, flexibility and acceptance is critical: “What people see when they come to our church is a lot of rules and regulations. Yes, sacraments are important and yes, traditions are important, but we have to be understanding of everyone and we have to more flexible.” In line with Kim’s desire for a more flexible church, a hospitable and “messy” church that takes risks appeals to Laurie: “I like that [Pope Francis] has a vision of the church where you can be as messy as you want to be.” Bronwyn touched on the same theme of flexibility and messiness, speaking of the faults caused by the “human” church, and her trust in self to practice in a way that aligns with her values:

I believe that the spirit of God is in the church, but is mediated through imperfect humans, and they don't always get it right, and I don't always get it right. So, I try to take what is good, and either ignore or protest what is not.

Participants also spoke about Pope Francis and the culture shift they see in today’s church. While they are optimistic about what his leadership could mean for the church, using words like “humility” and “hope,” all of the participants see contradictions between Vatican discourse on women’s roles and their own vision and current experiences as Catholic women.
Said Kim: “I think that if the church is to survive, it has to understand that women need to have an equal role.” Bronwyn spoke of her disappointment in the contradictions between what the Vatican is saying about women in leadership and what it is actually doing: “The lovely words are disappointing. . . . Until there are changes at the top levels, and until women are included, nothing really changes.” Anne was quick to point out that mere change would not address her concerns: “Change is not enough. I want to see progress or improvement.” Laurie, who agrees with Pope Francis’ concept of a messy church, is less favourable and optimistic, however, about his views on women: “I do think he has a blind spot around women, though I don't think he’s really twigged into that.”

**Behaviours (revise, resist, dismiss).** One way of coming to terms with tensions between their feminist and spiritual identities and their disagreement with church teachings and practices included revising, resisting, or dismissing rituals, symbols, teachings, and doctrine. By situating authority within themselves, drawing on their belief in the primacy of informed conscience, and participating in a way that aligns with their vision and values, participants are able to maintain feminist and spiritual identities and remain connected to the larger communal Catholic identity.

All participants expressed conflict with the changes to the Mass that took place in 2011, with some participants sharing similar sentiments to those expressed by members of the Canadian pro-change group Catholic Network for Women’s Equality.¹ Feminists in this group expressed a number of concerns, including the obscurity of the translation, the emphasis on sin, and the omission of gender-inclusive language. Maria discussed the changes, explaining how she

dismisses the changes to the prayers. She continues to pray the originals, even within the communal setting, questioning the political rationale behind the change:

> I do get my back up about [the changes] because I see political motivations in changing the wording. In my own subversive way, I refuse to accept the change. Yes, I understand that things do change, but . . . I tend to look at the motivation.

While Anne didn’t refer to any particular element of the Mass, she, too, spoke about discernment and self-assessment in deciding what rituals and parts of the Mass she will participate in, and how that process shapes her identity. For Anne, ritual is approached not as mere habit or a feeling of duty; ritual must be done in a way that feels authentic. She gives herself “permission” to decide which rituals align with her feminist and spiritual values:

> I give myself the freedom and space to be who I want to be and when I want to be. . . . God knows where I'm at. . . . I don't call it picking and choosing, but I think some people would.

Laurie talked about how she revises the language of the Mass to be more inclusive of women. Like Maria, she referenced power and politics behind some of the language choices in the Mass: “I try to throw in my inclusive language. . . . I find that it's well within the power of the church to shift the liturgy in such a way to be more inclusive, and they don't.” Like Laurie, Bronwyn, too, revises the language: “I try very hard not to use the word ‘He’ when I speak of God. It's hard because it pops out automatically, because that's how I was conditioned. But I try to use the word ‘God’ instead.”

For each of the participants, two issues incited intense emotions of pain and anger: sexuality and women’s issues. All participants aver that the church violates their rights by attempting to control women’s sexuality and women’s personal lives. Consistent with other
women in the study, Kim dismisses the church’s views on birth control: “As far as I'm concerned, the church has no place in that.” Maria’s “blood boils” when she reflects on the history of the church’s position on women’s sexuality:

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the Catholic church has long been in the business of trying to control women's sexuality. . . [and] it's inconceivable that the decisions should be made by men. . . . It’s oppression! It's the negation of a woman's right to decide. But women did and do decide. They leave the church.

Both Anne and Kim spoke about feeling judged and marginalized as single mothers seeking baptism for their infant children. When Kim approached her priest to be married and have her child baptized in the Catholic Church, the priest refused. She related the experience to me: “He felt he had the right to say ‘no’ even though I was an active practicing Catholic. That was a definite ‘You shalt not do,’ and he had the power to hold it over me.” She strategically contacted a priest in another parish in a different town who conducted the marriage and baptism. Anne, too, spoke very personally about her own challenges she had experienced as a single mother, relating her feelings of the “stigma” and “judgement” she felt meeting with a male lay leader overseeing baptismal preparation. Her tears, as she recounted the experience, were indicative of the pain the memory still evokes:

I was a practicing Roman Catholic . . . [and] in a very vulnerable place in my life, so I needed to hear supportive statements. . . . I didn't anticipate some of the judgement that I received. As a single mom struggling with her situation, it was an opportunity, I felt, for [the lay leader] to practice his beliefs. I got support from the majority of the parish and from Father [ ], but not from this person.
Bronwyn and Laurie both spoke on the issue from a very personal perspective as well. Bronwyn rejects the church's position on divorce: “You know, how can leaving a relationship that is dangerous or just not happy, not lifegiving, be the worst thing in the world – so bad that you can’t receive communion?” Laurie discussed how she navigated her experiences of misogyny and sexual harassment: “I had to learn how to say ‘fuck off.’” She went on: “I always had to be really, really smart. I have a good sense of humour, I can be funny when I need to be – those kinds of things – real survival strategies. But I never went the deferential route.”

**Presence (visibility and invisibility).** This theme demonstrates the agentic ways participants purposefully shape not only their own spiritual identities, but the identities of others, through their visibility and invisibility. What is particularly notable about the narratives in this theme, is the various ways the participants are transforming the dominant culture by creating spaces or shaping belief systems that reflect their feminist spiritual ethics and are more women-friendly and inclusive.

All participants named the leadership style of priests in their local Catholic organizational culture as either a source of identity affirmation or identity conflict, as this culture was a significant determinant of the ease at which the women could occupy meaningful church roles. Kim, for example, explained: “The obstacles [for women] are based more on whether [the priest] is willing to listen openly and allow full-participation in the church.” Similarly, Maria used the analogy of priests having the authority to either “close doors” or “open doors.”

For Bronwyn, though conscience serves as a source of liberation, it was clear as she discussed clergy that it can also be a source of “frustration”: “[The obstacles] vary from parish to parish, depending on the priest’s conscience and how they perceive women and our place in the church. Even those who value us are bound by their vows. They can only do so much.” She
recounted being supported by a priest for voicing her feelings and for the right to question church teachings. “He told me, ‘Don't think that dissent and discussion are *not* the tradition of the church.’”

Some of the participants talked about being compelled to speak out despite the risks, risks that were manifested as inner turmoil, as well as external risks, including verbal backlash from fellow parishioners, clergy, and/or church leadership. Laurie spoke about the external risks she’s experienced:

I am very direct. If I say it, I mean it. If I think it, I'll say it. And that's probably not the best way to be when you know you will be under fire. But I can't help that. That's just who I am.

Bronwyn, too, feels compelled to speak out, though she admits she has experienced not only verbal backlash from men, but also women holding very traditional views, which she noted she finds especially troublesome: “Sometimes it is the hardest to see this kind of inequity being supported by women. They’re one of us! It’s like betrayal of who we are!” Despite feeling the responsibility to speak out, she continually struggles with internal conflict and feelings of vulnerability when doing so:

I've spoken out loudly to address some of the attitudes that are so demeaning about women and probably gotten into a lot of trouble about some things. Why can't we speak about Catholic doctrine? Why can't say what we feel? I feel compelled, but also intimidated. . . . There's always some fear of conflict that's there. . . . But I can't not speak out.
She sees her authority to call out injustices as inspired from God: “I once said to my spiritual
director, “I wish I had the faith of this person, and she said, ‘That's a beautiful simplistic faith,
but you are called to something different. You are called.’”

Maria chooses not to speak out in the parish she is currently in. She, too, talks about the
vulnerability that arises from her concern about conflict with others and its potential impact on
her communal faith experience and her communal identity: “In some regards, I think I take a step
back because I don't want to get in a big angry fight that would erode my need or desire to
worship in a group.”

Some of the women spoke about increasing their visibility as a way to present a
counternarrative to the church’s male authority. All of the women in some capacity are, or have
been actively involved in Catholic ministry. We begin to see how they are not just attempting to
create a more inclusive church structure, but are shaping a culture and influencing a more
egalitarian and inclusive agenda that nurtures and develops women’s spiritual. Bronwyn, for
example, practices visibility by trying “to skew things towards the God of love” as a speaker and
retreat leader, always being conscious of legitimizing women’s experiences. While in the
following sentence she tells me she feels that all she is really doing is listening, her response
serves to interrupt the silencing and marginalization of women by acknowledging their
experiences and emotions: “Women who have left the church have come to me with their pain.
All I can do is listen. All I can say is, ‘You're absolutely right. I'm sorry that this happened to
you.'” She goes on to explain how she also uses her leadership roles to help shape for these
women an understanding of a God who is merciful and loving:
I've never felt like a leader, nor have I ever really sought leadership. I have kind of fallen into these things. But in those roles, if I am teaching or sharing, I always, always, always stress the compassion of God, that no one is excluded.

Laurie, too, feels her influence as a woman leading workshops on Catholic spirituality is especially important for female audiences, particularly in the absence of female clergy:

I know that there are women who are called to the priesthood, and I firmly believe that there is no theological reason why women cannot be ordained. . . . But I am not going to sit around and wait for that. I am just going to do the work that I think is important. And that might mean being on the margins of the structure – not necessarily on the margins of the faith – but certainly on the margins of the structure.

Anne also voiced the need for women in the church to represent their own experiences. She reiterated a message I heard from other participants: “Men are our allies. We need male support, but they are not our voices.”

Unlike Laurie, Maria does not feel women’s ordination is necessary. She maintains, however, that a structure allowing for consensual decision-making is necessary: “It doesn't bother me so much to have a male priest. . . . Maybe it's just conditioning (laughs). . . . But in decision-making, it is unfortunate that the final decision needs to be a man's.”

Kim shows agency by very intentionally choosing to participate and be visible in some ministries, and self-excluding in others. Trained as a lay minister when her parish had no priest, she expressed feeling like a placeholder when her position was taken away upon the arrival of a new priest. She shared how she takes back her power:

What frustrates me is [lay people] were encouraged to do certain things when the church was in dire need of help, but then we could no longer do it as it should only be done by a
priest. . . . But I’ll let it go, I’ll ignore it and say, “Go ahead, have at ’er, but don't ask me again, because I probably won't say yes.

Maria, who has been a “very vocal” voice in some of her parishes, sees the power of invisibility as a strategy to gain access to power in church cultures that are not as open: “[Women] need a voice on broader issues. But rather than the strident female voice, I believe in the power behind the throne.”

Unwilling to compromise her integrity and her personal values, Laurie has intentionally distanced herself from attending regular Mass. While her invisibility and positioning on the outskirts affirms and empowers her identity, she nonetheless experiences loss:

I miss it, and I do enjoy when I get to a liturgy or a Mass and it all comes together. It makes me absolutely heartbroken that I can't do that on a regular basis. It feels false. So when I do find it, I quite cherish it.

(Re)location and (re)discovery. Participant narratives revealed a vision of church that is not hierarchical but more like a web. In a very dynamic, self-directed, and multi-directional manner, participants move about on the strands of the web. They interact with multiple people in multiple spaces. They create support systems and they explore others’ identities – within and outside their own traditions – while discerning and informing their own identities. In these spaces the personal meets the collective.

Communities of discernment in her tradition. Very intentionally, all participants sought out relationships with others to both inform their beliefs and their identities. When Kim was considering leaving the church, she turned to a Catholic woman religious for guidance: “It was through conversations with Sister, and getting my head wrapped around what was really a teaching of the Bible and what was a man-made, that I decided to stay.” She described how she
locates authority within herself, and while she engages her Catholicism to shape that authority, it does not supersede it: “I have had conversations with parish priests and a [nun] about things that I disagree with. And I've come to terms with them in my own way.”

Some participants sought out friends or established informal groups to talk with or vent as a way to manage, or at least reduce the tension created by discordant identities. Laurie “navigates [the tension] sometimes by getting mad and by finding a community of like-minded people to talk . . . with.” In the absence of belonging to a parish, she creates her own communities, acknowledging that doing so is not necessarily easy: “Sometimes I'm good at it, and sometimes I'm not.”

Bronwyn “works through it” by talking to her husband first: “We're in synch in how we see God.” She talked about the small groups she has belonged to over the years: “We're able to be open about our disagreements with the church and not be censured for it, and kind of work things through together by talking about it.”

During our interview, Anne expressed her appreciation in being able to share with me, another Catholic woman, the complexities of navigating her Catholic faith: “I am so glad we connected because I need to be able to talk about these things with people. The only other person I can talk to is my mom.” While in the past, Kim and Maria had both shared their frustrations with their church with understanding women in their families, due to changes in life circumstances this is no longer an option for them. Today they find themselves with little to no avenue to talk over their experiences as Catholic women and feminists constructing and navigating identity.

Participants demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to acquiring the wisdom and/or the theological tools to critically and constructively engage with, and discern insights from their
own traditions to inform and transform their identities. Three participants have formal Catholic training or post-secondary education beyond catechism. Kim trained to become a lay ecclesial minister as an avenue to explore her faith. She explained: “I took lay formation in order to learn more about my faith even though I had been born a Catholic, because there were certain things I didn't understand.” Bronwyn also has formal training, and Laurie has a graduate degree in theology from a Catholic university. In her early twenties, Anne became an Oskâpêwis, an Elder’s helper in ceremonies, and is now recognized by her community as a Grandmother, which she explained to me is someone “who helps conduct ceremony and facilitates healing sessions, as well as guides and supports others.”

**Communities of discernment in difference.** This sub-theme shows how participants negotiate identity through engagement with different traditions. Four participants sought resources from other spiritual traditions through study, practice, or engagement with individuals in those traditions, not with the intent of replacing their Catholic belief system, but to deepen their understanding of their spiritual identity. With access to different traditions much easier in today’s modern society, these participants value wisdom in these other traditions, drawing on their resources and weaving them into meanings from their own Catholic tradition and their feminism. Maria explores other traditions through research. She has participated in other traditions as a “guest” and talks of the respect she has for other’s beliefs:

> Whether we say Jesus, God, Allah, Yahweh, Creator, or whatever, we are recognizing a power greater than ourselves and greater than the world. . . . We have to be open to the beliefs and practices of other religions, and to understand that our way is not the only way to worship. How others worship is not wrong; it is different.
Maria values a more universal faith community: “I also love the [Lord’s Prayer] because it's a universal Christian prayer, so people . . . from other denominations can take part.”

Laurie very purposefully surrounds herself with a network of friends from a variety of spiritual backgrounds who are actively involved in their traditions. She also engages in practices of other traditions. Her ability to “stretch” herself does not threaten her Catholic identity; instead, her willingness to “stretch” her identity and tap into resources from others serves as a source of personal support and an avenue of spiritual growth:

I continue to gather a lot of spiritual comfort from the people around me whose faith lives are more practically oriented than mine, mostly Catholic, but other denominations as well. . . . Whatever I practice, it's always sort of rooted in the Catholic tradition. . . . I could be Buddhist and I'd be Catholic. Even when I do yoga, which I actually find quite spiritual . . . , I’m Catholic in doing that.

Bronwyn chose to remain in the church after seeking support and insights from others. As she does so, she goes through a process of identity transformation: “If I hadn't sought out teachers for myself, I probably would have left the church – different saints and different Christians, not necessarily Catholic, but Christians that have written about God and faith.” She sought the guidance of a female spiritual director who is not Catholic, who taught her to trust the authority within:

When I was ready to leave [the church], I was really mad. . . . What I understood after talking to her is that anger is good if it motivates me to action, but I have to move beyond the anger, to know my truth, to listen to the spirit inside me. If I need to walk, to talk with my feet, then I need to do that. It's my choice. So, what I learned from her is to watch my
anger because it can overtake me and become nasty, and also to recognize the truth within my anger and trust it.

Anne moves fluidly between her Indigenous and Catholic spiritualities:

At different times of my life, I have had guidance from the Creator. . . . In my Catholic faith, I've gone to silent retreats. As part of my spiritual faith, I also go to vision quests, sweats, [and] sundances. . . . I feel like I get the guidance I need directly from God because I pray, smudge, meditate, [and] fast. . . . And I go to people who are spiritual.

Difference, however, in the form of religious fundamentalism or Catholics resistant to change was a concern raised by some participants. Bronwyn shared her worries about the growing fundamentalism in the church and the world: “I really object to the exclusivity in the church. I think that it’s reflective of the radical fundamentalism that seems to be part of the world and part of our church. That's worrisome to me.” She tries to strike a balance between standing up for her values while being non-defensive. Her narrative reflects her effort to resist polarized thinking and navigate turmoil created by difference. Bronwyn explained: “I have to understand there are many roads to God. The conservative road is a road too. But I have to know my truth, and not be threatened by, or afraid of people that think differently.”

Kim described the power struggle in her church around changes to ritual and the unwillingness of some parishioners to compromise on interpretations: “They say, ‘Nope, can't do that. It's the law.’” Like Bronwyn, she too was conscious to separate disagreement from judgement and makes a conscious effort to try to avoid the very dualistic and oppositional thinking she sees as polarizing: “I also realize it’s not my place to judge.” Similarly, Maria adopted a voice of tolerance as she recounted her disagreement with the position of a Catholic woman who opposed taking a vaccine she believed contained aborted fetal tissue: “As she
talked, I thought, ‘I understand your concern, but are you going to put your life and the life of others at risk because of this?’ It just seemed like such an odd reaction.”

**Summary: Conflict and constraint.** This section highlights just how broad the definition of “remaining in the church” is, the diversity of women’s Catholic identities, and the ways a gendered lens influences identity. Participants’ identities are marked by a very multidirectional movement, and while they appear to “stay in the church,” in actuality they fluidly live out their feminist and spiritual identities in a multitude of internal (within themselves) and external spaces. Their Catholic identities are a paradox: Participants are both contemporary and traditional. Their decision to retain both their spiritual and feminist identities inspire and inform them as they navigate sites of conflict. Choosing to negotiate the multiplicity of their identities and remain in the church, they claim the authority to engage in a number of different cognitive and behavioural strategies to negotiate parts of the tradition they disagree with, to re-establish connections with the roots of their tradition, and to “claim their space” as women in a mal-authored and male-centered institution.

It seems that because they have to “work harder” to reinterpret a tradition that is more meaningful and more aligned with their identities, they do not take the tradition for granted. They are very intentional in their actions and their thoughts, they are collective without being conforming, and they are actively and thoughtfully, though not necessarily easily, shaping their own individual identity within the collective realm. They draw on the elements of compassion and the justice lived out by Jesus within their Catholic tradition rather than power and self-righteous dogmatism. Moreover, in improvising the tradition through their feminist lens, they are re-creating a more diversified and fluid form of Catholicism and revising traditional notions of what it means to be a Catholic.
**Embracing the Wisdom (Through Her Lens)**

Spiritual traditions are made up of multiple strands. While the participants contest and revise the strands of their tradition that conflict with their values, other strands – other parts of the Catholic tradition – are discerned and experienced in ways that feel more authentic to them, and, in turn, can be rich and meaningful sources of growth. Narratives show how their identities “converse” with the tradition – their identities shaping the meaning of the tradition and the tradition shaping their identities. This super-ordinate theme highlights and unravels the many ways participants draw upon elements of the Catholic tradition – not as passive consumers but as active and engaged producers. The title of this section was selected because it reflected the “conversation” between the wisdom these women engage with in the tradition and the wisdom of their feminist spiritual identities. Narratives illuminate the way their Catholic tradition is understood and experienced through their feminist lens. Their narratives show a much broader definition of religious or spiritual identity than might seem obvious, one that is experience-centered and does not rely on strict adherence to doctrine or teachings, though it is connected to the tradition. These experiences are woven into participants’ everyday lives, both in and outside the church, and their narratives illuminate a “faith embodied.” Four themes expand on the findings of embracing the wisdom: God as trust and groundedness (soul speak); the Jesus of justice and inclusivity; spiritual and feminist role models (herstory); and community and connection.

**God as trust and groundedness (soul speak).** All of the participant narratives revealed an interdependent and intuitive relationship with the Divine. They are comfortable putting their trust in the abstract, holding beliefs they may not always be able to rationalize or intellectually explain – why I refer to this theme as “soul speak.” Narratives highlight the difficulty in trying to
describe this ineffable relationship and show an embodied and emotional experience of participants’ spirituality that is connected to their religious tradition. Kim’s narrative highlights how her identity is shaped around her experience of God through the sacraments and even the religious space, as can be seen through her choice of words such as “that feeling that you get,” “a peace,” “really powerful,” and even “it may seem weird.” This is not an intellectual exercise in understanding God, church, or ritual, but rather an embodied and emotional experience of God through the Eucharist and in the church space. Kim experienced this feeling of groundedness while visiting a church in another country. She explained: “Even though I didn’t understand a word they were saying, it was like, ‘Yeah, this is where I need to be.’ I cannot explain it. My friend asked: ‘Why are you crying?’ and I said, ‘I have no idea.’”

Bronwyn, too, talked about an embodied feeling of groundedness by finding God’s benevolent love in the ordinary: “It slips in everywhere. Just listening to the song, Love, Love Crazy Love reminds me of God’s crazy love. It’s in music, in nature – God is just everywhere. I don't need a special space for God to be present.”

Laurie’s collection of religious artifacts keeps her grounded. These religious objects within her home, and the meanings that she gives to them, are an expression of her identity that is connected to her Catholic tradition. While she physically locates on the margins of the structure, choosing not to regularly attend Mass, through these artifacts she lays claim to “her church”:

It means a lot to have the artifacts of my family and ancestors. I have a papal blessing that my grandmother got when she turned 80. My family’s like, "What the hell? Why are you keeping that?" Because this is the connection to my spiritual home. Even though I’m not in the churches and not receiving the sacraments on a regular basis, I find all of this
quite sacramentally uplifting. It's what keeps me rooted in my faith, in my spirituality, in my church.

Anne, too, acknowledged that there are aspects of her spirituality intrinsic to her identity that cannot be completely understood in a cognitive manner, but are also experienced at a very emotional level: “Life everlasting! And I love the idea that there is a Three-in-One God! And I know I'll never get my head wrapped around it all.” She speaks about an embodied experience of faith, feeling spiritually grounded by sound and a connection to the women in her family:

Sound, music, and chanting are really important parts of my spirituality and my practice. . . I was given a gift to sing, and I sang in church from the time I was a little girl. I know my mom and grandmother did too. Singing religious and spiritual music, and to hear it from others, keeps me grounded in my faith.

Maria talked about the importance of her belief in the Trinity (Three-in-One God) and how it distinguishes her Catholic identity from non-Catholics. She reflected on how parts of the Catholic tradition must look through the lens of non-Catholics: “Really, to look at our practice from an outsider point of view, Catholics are pretty darned weird.” She recalled the questioning of a non-Catholic. “He said: ‘What do you mean the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one? That's ridiculous.’”

The Jesus of justice and inclusivity. For all participants, God, in the form of Jesus, is a central figure in shaping both their feminist and spiritual identities. Jesus is both a liberating figure in their lives and liberator of the marginalized. Anne saw Jesus as a countercultural leader whose radical treatment of women violated the customs of His time:
I didn't see a hierarchy in who Jesus surrounded Himself with. I saw Him have everybody from the women sitting at the table to the men, and He had respect for women despite other's judgement of them. There's something about His role modeling.

She spoke about Jesus in a very personal way, and aligns her views with how she believes He would view the decisions made by the church: “Sometimes I think Jesus would be a little disappointed. . . . I think he would be, ‘Oh, for crying out loud people!’”

Kim referred to the institutionalization of the tradition as she distinguished the increasingly traditional and rigid “man-made” changes in her church from the teachings of Jesus:

Now we've gone backwards and too rigid on the rules of the church rather than on ministering to the person. And I don't think that was ever the intent of scripture, or of Jesus' teachings. . . . I don’t think that was ever the intent . . . that you should be so hung up on little things that are man-made.

Bronwyn, too, referenced the “the teachings of Jesus” as a model for living one’s life: “To try to love God as best as we understand God, to try and love one another, and to support one another. That's the core. I believe that God is compassionate, merciful, and open, and doesn't turn anyone away.” She drew on scripture to describe Jesus’ liberation of Catholic women:

In the Gospel of Luke there is a woman that has been bent over double for 18 years. Jesus heals her and she straightens up. And that to me is the image of what needs to happen for women in the church. Because Jesus never pushed women down. . . . I can just see her bent over and kind of peering through all these men's mid-sections, just trying to see Jesus. And Jesus raises her up so she is standing tall, equal, herself among the men.

That's just a beautiful image to me.
Spiritual and feminist role models (herstory). Devotion to the saints is part of the Catholic tradition. Nearly all participants named saints as models, most of them female, in addition to other historical and contemporary Catholic women. These figures connect their modern-day identities to a tradition of women who modeled, in the words of Laurie, “a spirituality that women brought into the church in ways that men didn't.” Most notable, while many figures named are not well-known, they were powerful faithful women who called men to accountability in both the sacred and secular domain. Like the work of feminist theologians, participants are seeking to rewrite these often-forgotten-about and untold stories – “herstory” – back into Catholic “history” and into their own lives.

Bronwyn finds support through female saints who sought equality and justice. She described reclaiming women’s wisdom: “I’m supported by the wisdom of women in the church through the centuries. . . . They spoke their minds. They didn't always agree with the hierarchy, but they were strong.”

Anne’s life has been influenced by a number of female saints, with Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, an Algonquin-Mohawk woman, the most celebrated. Anne described the affirmation she felt when Saint Kateri was canonized:

In my house, Saint Kateri is like Mary. We had icons of St. Kateri. Nobody knew who she was, but I knew. Then it was like, "We're going to call her ‘saint.’” And I was like, "Yeah!" People were asking, "Who is she?" and I’m like, "Oh my gosh, I love this!"

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2 Saints and spiritual women of influence named were Perpetua, Felicity, “all the Marys,” Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, Joan of Arc, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Hildegard von Bingen, Teresa of Avila, Mechtild of Magdeburg and contemporary women Dorothy Day, Joan Chittister, Mary Malone, and Saint Teresa of Calcutta.
Laurie, too, related her feelings of identity affirmation after carving out a relationship with female and feminist saints when she was older. She finds her relationship with these female mentors “really comforting”:

I remember as a kid reading all these stories about saints and it was all these guys. I didn't really connect. When I started to read about women in the church . . . I realized, “Wow, they are so much like me. These struggles are ever present.”

Like many Catholic women, including some of those in my study, Mary, Jesus’ mother, holds special meaning for Laurie. She explained: “Mary is big in my life in a weird kind of way.” It is her own reconstructed vision of Mary, however, that aligns with her identity. She proceeded to describe the process she has worked through: “I really tried to think imaginatively about Mary. . . I love her, but the construction of her in the church over time as obedient, deferential, and disembodied has been problematic for me.”

**Community and connection.** “Community” and “connection” were reoccurring words in the narratives of all participants. While they are central to their shared Catholic identities, their narratives reveal the way these are personally experienced. Community and connection are manifested through people, as well as through religious objects and events. Maria and Laurie both collect family rosaries. Praying the rosary connects Maria to generations of Catholic identity in her family. As she speaks, we can envision the strand of the rosary weaving together with the many strands of her identity. Her identity, and the family and religious experiences and history that have shaped her identity, are embedded into the religious object and into the ritual of praying the rosary, creating meaning for her:

I remember my grandmother always with rosary beads. When I went to my grandparents’ grave last time, I hadn't realized this, but on their grave stone is the rosary. I just thought,
“That's the connection.” I actually have everybody's rosary beads because nobody else wanted them, but I pray on the different beads because of the sense of time and place that is within them. That holding and prayer just becomes part of that ritual.

Laurie’s religious icons and rosary collection, too, and the meanings she ascribes to them connect her to her heritage, shaping her spiritual identity:

I've got, I don't know, how many images of Mary. . . . And I've got rosaries from all kinds of aunts, uncles, grandmothers, and what not. . . . It's part of my spiritual heritage and I get strength from that. I know. It's weird. I'm living in this post-modern world and I'm definitely Catholic in funny kinds of ways.

For Kim and Bronwyn, the Mass and the Eucharist are expressed as a shared community identity. Said Kim: “The biggest piece is that sense of community. But it’s also a place where people come together in prayer, knowing God’s presence is in that space and in the Body of Christ.” Bronwyn, too, spoke of people coming together, using the image of darkness and light in the Mass to illuminate and express the collective wisdom of community:

I love the Easter Vigil celebration where it's all dark and we slowly light the church, candle by candle, passing the light to one another. I love the image of community creating a place of light and warmth together. Our small lights all put together make a difference. I think, you know, it's community. It’s all about community.

For Anne, the Mass is a community of people with shared identity that support one another.

“When we get together and celebrate Mass, and we support one another in community and have common beliefs and values, I feel like it reinforces and supports people in that, without it, they are quite rudderless,” she said.
Maria spoke of the unifying power of prayer, experienced in a very physical way through touch, in shaping a collective identity with Catholics as well as non-Catholics:

It's one thing to pray alone; it's something else to pray as a cohesive group. I loved it pre-H1N1 when everyone, not just families, joined hands to pray the *Our Father*. It can be literally touching a stranger, not in greeting, but in communion.

The power of this sense of community is, perhaps, best understood through loss. Despite Laurie choosing not to attend Mass regularly because of the personal challenges it presents, it continues to be important to her. She explains: “And I guess that's what I miss the most. There's two things: I miss the sacraments and I miss the community.”

**Summary: Embracing the wisdom (through her lens).** Within these narratives the women claim an unfiltered vulnerability. They trust in a Divine that they cannot see, but experience in everyday thoughts, objects, prayers, emotions, places, actions, and experiences in an embodied way both in and outside the Catholic church. While each one has a very personal experience of Catholic identity, the shared rituals and practices weave together with their feminism and their spirituality, connecting their individual identities to a collective tradition and sense of continuity with their past. Participant narratives demonstrate a very personal and “friendly” connection with Jesus as both human and God. Their connection to their Catholic spirituality is rooted in the embodied example of Christ, and they define their Catholicism by His transformative and inclusive teachings, His proper action, as well as His rejection of selectivity and restrictive norms for women. Their narratives suggest that their faith, like that of Jesus, is not a private belief to keep to themselves, but more of an embodied political statement that aims for dialogue, diversity, mutual respect, and inclusiveness. Just as Jesus did not trade one identity to

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3 Following the H1N1 flu virus in 2009, some Catholic dioceses implemented liturgical restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of infection.
live another, but fluidly moved between God and human, radical and reflective, teacher and
listener, these women, too, follow His example and choose to challenge dualities by navigating a
multitude of identities. Narratives once again highlighted the influence of female role models for
these women as they navigate feminist and spiritual identities. Participants are inspired and
supported by female saints and historical women – female activists – who were marginalized and
misunderstood, who battled patriarchy and gender barriers, and who had the hope, conviction,
and will to believe in something greater than the status quo in a tradition they cared deeply about.
Weaving the identities of these women into their own lives and identities empowers their
feminism and their spirituality. Narratives also highlight a deep sense of interconnection with
Catholics around them – to the communal Catholic tradition, as well as to other traditions.
Participants are very fluent navigating both a communal Catholic identity and an individual
Catholic identity; however, even though both bring an abundant feeling of the Divine, doing so is
complex and not without tension.

The Medium is the Message: Feminist Spirit Embodied

Their feminist and spiritual identities are the essence of who these women are. Their
identities are influenced by their past and their histories, and dynamically lived out in the
present, in the world around them. Each woman’s faith acquires its meaning through her
practices, as well as in the way she interprets the teachings and applies them to her everyday
lived experiences. Participants articulated a seamlessness between their secular and spiritual lives
(“It’s in my bones”) and living out their feminist and spiritual identities though a leadership style
of service and inclusivity (from the pew to the boardroom).

“It’s in my bones.” For all of the participants, the varied pieces of their lives – personal,
professional, and spiritual – are intertwined. Laurie’s faith and her spiritual identity do not just
define her; they are part of her in a very physical way. She explains: “I am always going to be Catholic. It's in my bones.” Bronwyn, too, talked about seeing the presence of God in both places, though she also spoke of the oppression of women in both spaces:

My faith informs my life. . . . I kind of embrace that we can’t separate the secular from the sacred, because I think everything that God made is holy ground. And I think the issues in the secular world are mirrored in the church, such as the role of women.

Anne talked about her spiritual identity as guiding her actions: “My Indigenous and Catholic spirituality is quite a blend. It's how I conduct myself, the things I spend my time doing, who I surround myself with.” She too, spoke of her faith as being a defining of self:

My faith is at the core of me. It guides me and how I act in my life. . . . The real world includes the religious and the spiritual to me. . . . [These] have to be able to somehow mesh, and I have to go through a process to sort that out. It's like a filter.

While neither Maria nor Kim saw a separation between the secular and the sacred, both noted that their core values do not always align with the Church. Maria explained: “I don't always necessarily make decisions based on what my Catholic faith says might be right, but certainly my faith influences everything I do.” Kim agreed, though she recalled the stigma she felt at being expected to “explain” herself to colleagues to justify her pluralistic identity. At the time, she was in a healthcare role working with women terminating pregnancies and with men who had AIDS:

[Some colleagues] didn’t understand how I managed the two roles. They asked: “So why are you as a Catholic working in this particular field?” I just said, “Because I care . . . because the people that are in these situations require my support more than ever, and I can separate the piece of my faith I think is man-made from the rest of my beliefs.” My
life purpose matches up with my core values . . . , which probably don't align with all church teachings.

**From the pew to the boardroom.** Participants’ professions as leaders make up a large part of their experience. They fashion their feminist and spiritual identities together not only to shape them as leaders but as a way to shape and influence their environments. Most discussed their leadership as “service” or “servant leadership.” Some wear their spiritual identities openly in the workplace, while others do not; all, however, bring their religion and their spirituality into the public domain.

Bronwyn spoke of the systemic inequities she sees in the workplace “in terms of salaries and positions of power and all of that.” As a service-oriented leader, she exercises her authority to empower those around her. Just as she vocalizes against inequalities inside the church, she “calls out” workplace inequalities. Said Bronwyn: “At work I am seen as a leader, and it’s another place where the feeling ‘I have to say this because I don’t think it’s right’ comes out.”

Laurie described her leadership as “service” inspired by her spirituality: “I think service is just a huge part of how I understand my faith and I like it. Service – being out in the community, not just in the church.” While “being at the front of the pack” is not Laurie’s priority, she sees leadership as a responsibility and an opportunity to positively influence an environment. “I also don't like to watch the person at the front of the pack make a mess of things,” she said.

Neither Maria nor Kim (in her current professional role) openly identify as a Catholic in the workplace. Said Maria: “Most of the people I work with would be surprised to find out I have any religion. I think they would say I am spiritual, not Catholic.” Kim shared similar sentiments:
Whether I tell people I’m Catholic or not, I would hope that they could see that love in my actions. . . . I like to lead by servant leadership . . . to work with people I manage, and not have people do for me. I'll walk alongside, or guide.

As women who at times feel on the margins of the church, an ethic of inclusiveness rooted in their spirituality and feminism is foundational to these two women’s leadership styles. Both women are cautious that they not be confused with religious individuals who seek to convert others. Maria defined this as “acceptance of people for who they are and where they are at that point in their lives.” Kim, too, brings her spiritual identity and her religion into the public domain through her actions: “The big one is you don't judge other people [and] you treat everybody as though they could be the face of God.”

Unlike Maria and Kim, Anne is open about her Catholic and Indigenous spirituality in the workplace. What is notable, however, is that she is careful to explain how she is not concerned with converting others to a particular belief system, but is genuinely open to religious pluralism and appreciative of colleagues who respect her beliefs: “I'm pretty lucky that I have people around me who respect [my beliefs]. I don't push my beliefs on others; I respect their belief systems too.” She, too, views leadership as service: “I find a greater sense of peace and connectedness when I am of service to the people I manage – not being top down.” She used the imagery of braiding her hair to explain how her spirituality is woven into her role as a leader:

The humility, the honesty, the Beatitudes that Jesus taught are mirrored in the Seven Sacred Teachings of our Aboriginal elders – [and the] kindness. These are things I define myself by. Every time I braid my hair there are three strands – body, mind, and spirit – the Three of the Trinity. This part of my Aboriginal spirituality blends with my spirituality connected to my Catholicism. Each strand stands to be honest, to be kind, to
be strong, and I repeat that as I braid my hair. And that's what I do when I lead. I have to be honest, be kind, [and] be strong, and I have to have body, mind, and spirit in balance to be a good leader. All those teachings are supported by both of my cultures, my faith, and religions.

**Summary: The medium is the message.** In this section, participants live out their feminist and spiritual identities in everyday practice, including in their work. Their identities are experienced in a very embodied way through their encounters with others in and outside the church. Participants shared insights into ways they find the Divine in the workspace, as well as how they bring the Divine into the workspace as leaders. They do this not with the intent to convert people or place expectations on them to align them with any particular belief system, but to embody the values of inclusiveness, compassion, and respect for others into the workplace. This is not always an easy task: Aware of stereotypes around religion and more rigid and legalistic religious approaches, they are particularly conscious of the religion and spirituality they are modeling. As well, being both spiritual and feminist in the workplace requires a continual commitment to reflexivity, and narratives show participants’ concerted efforts to balance authority. The effort participants make as leaders to share their power, to be “servants” without relinquishing all of their autonomy and authority, is evident in their experiences. Doing so opens them up to new insights and new ways of doing things in the workplace. Narratives show that choosing to be spiritual and feminist in the workplace requires the same commitment to identity negotiation in the public domain as it does inside the church.

**Chapter summary**

This phenomenological study focused on answering the question: How do Canadian Roman Catholic women negotiate feminist and spiritual identities? After conducting in-depth
interviews with five women, the researcher uncovered four key themes: early years; conflict and constraint: empowered by an adaptive sense of self; embracing the wisdom (through her lens); and, the medium is the message: feminist spirit embodied. Very early in their lives, participants were aware of gender restrictions in the church, but perhaps more notable is how their narratives reveal that their mothers, and other important women in their lives, taught them they had agency, choice, and how to navigate barriers. In essence, these women laid the groundwork for participants in deciding to be both feminist and spiritual in tandem. Also, particularly notable is that for some participants, positive experiences of church as a child or youth shaped a feminist ethic, while for others, it was negative and marginalizing experiences within the church that ignited within them a feminist ethic.

Participants’ decision to remain in the church is a process of discernment that is influenced by all of their experiences – positive and negative. The narratives of the participants show that for each of them, being a woman in the church can come at a price. So can resistance, whether one is vocally challenging limiting and discriminatory “truths” and practices of the church, or simply choosing to reject them in more subtle ways. The presence of anger and sadness in participants’ dialogue, and for some, the verbal backlash they have experienced from others in the church when they have spoken out, is the cause of great tension. While this differs for each participant and, in fact, differs at various points in each of their lives, what they share in common is how they each continually “filter” the range of their experiences. We learn from their narratives that this filtering is not a one-time process, but is an ongoing process throughout their lives. Narratives also show that inequities and discriminatory practices and teachings do not render them powerless; all participants exude a confidence and a trust in their own authority and agency that is rooted in the teachings of Christ.
The different ways each participant reinterprets the tradition, experiences the tradition through a feminist lens, and lives out their feminist and spiritual identities, show that there is a multitude of ways women are Catholic. Their identities are not static; rather, they are complex, dynamic, and fluid. Women experience and live out religion through their own very personal and unique ways, even within the communal setting. They are individuals but not individualistic; their faith is very personal, yet their identities are linked to the collective tradition.

Whether it be with the support other Catholics (lay or clergy) or non-Catholics or on their own (but always in relationship with Christ), these five participants challenge authoritative and patriarchal images, teachings, rules, and roles by demonstrating ways of being Catholic that are not locked in adherence to doctrine or teachings but are more diffuse; they embody a more unofficial form of religion that is interpreted and negotiated through a feminist lens.

While hierarchical and patriarchal authority and power can be incompatible with these women’s values and beliefs, causing them frustration, anger, and very deep personal pain, participants are creatively working from the margins, but inside the faith and the institution. They are confronting power and reshaping new, more inclusive ways of being Catholic not only for themselves, but for others. In doing so, they are adapting religion, not just by calling out and challenging injustices, but by creating new truths and new possibilities about what it means to be Catholic. There is an activism woven into their identities that is in itself empowering. The considerable discernment they engage in as they navigate the tension seems to create a deep sense of stability and trust in their own authority, combined with a strong commitment and tenacity to create a vision of church that aligns with their core values.

As participants work through this process of discernment, their multidirectional identities move within, around, and outside of the Catholic tradition, both in an external physical sense and
in an internal sense. Participants showed a profound sense of openness and ease in dialoguing and engaging with other spiritual traditions, with one participant embracing two spiritual traditions and identities. They are still, however, deeply connected to the Catholic tradition but a more diffuse and less rigid tradition, laden with their own meanings. Many of the rituals and practices within their own Catholic tradition connect these women’s identities to a sense of continuity, community, and historical tradition that is growthful and empowering. Yet it is notable that even in these spaces and experiences of empowerment, participants are imprinting upon them a feminist lens. What might seem to the outsider to be a very traditional and monolithic religious identity, is, in reality, a more personal, innovative, and malleable expression of their spirituality. Narratives show how participants recover, and sometimes deconstruct and reconstruct, the stories of women in the Catholic tradition who have been silenced, minimized, or misrepresented and how they weave the identities of these women into their own lives and experiences. We also see how participants express and embody a more personalized experience of the Divine in the everyday, in ways that are not defined – though are influenced in part – by church tradition, but also influenced and shaped by their various identities and experiences.

In different ways, participants carve out smaller communities within their Catholic tradition and with other traditions to both affirm their identities, but also to challenge them and support their ongoing growth. One of the most obvious voids voiced by most participants was the lack of opportunity to openly discuss Catholic identity as a woman who is at odds with church teachings. Perhaps it is this experience of being on the margins that has made them more conscious of engaging others and being inclusive of others in their workplaces and their everyday lives.
Their faith is an embodied faith that is focused on acting for the common good and acting on their core values, and they live out their spiritual and feminist identities both within and outside the church. Narratives showed that their struggles with identity negotiation are not limited to inside the church walls, as some participants related their challenges of negotiating their Catholicism and their spirituality within what is most often considered “the secular” domain of the workplace. Even in these situations, participants demonstrated a profound commitment to openly wearing their spiritual identities, though at times their spiritual identities were more visibly apparent, while at others, were more in the background. The following chapter will further this discussion by integrating examples from literature with participant narratives to more deeply explore identity negotiation among these five Catholic women.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The question of this research is “How do Canadian Roman Catholic women negotiate feminist and spiritual identities? This chapter will explore each of the main themes generated in the analysis and connect them with existent literature. A final conclusion, limitations of the study, and opportunities for further research will also be discussed.

Shaping Her Feminist and Spiritual Identities – Early Years

Insights into the early experiences of the participants reveal that events from this time in their lives not only played a significant role in shaping a feminist spiritual identity, but, as will be shown later in this discussion, serve as a resource throughout their lives as they negotiate identity. These findings correlate with Dillon’s (1999) identity negotiation study of pro-change feminist and LGBTQ Catholics. Dillon (1999) noted the relevance of history in shaping identity for those in her study: “Although socially constructed, new interpretations and new identities are not created in a vacuum. They are always influenced and bounded by a particular historical,
cultural, and institutional context” (p. 13). Key themes under early years include family influences, influence of church, and choosing to negotiate.

**Influence of family.** Participants in my study spoke about the influence of family in their spiritual lives. Narratives revealed that family members played a significant role in shaping a strong feminist identity within their experience of their faith. Two key insights arose out of these narratives. Firstly, all but one (Laurie) of the women spoke about the primary role of female family members in their spiritual upbringing, as well in shaping a strong feminist ethic within the church setting. (It should be noted that Laurie referenced “family.”) Secondly, many of the women wove in themes of feminism while discussing their early church experience and how they were taught that they had agency in light of the patriarchy. Laurie’s parents, for example, affirmed her agency: “I wasn’t in any way told, ‘You can do this, but you can’t do that.’” Kim’s mom modeled negotiating a feminist and Catholic identity: “My mom played a big role in bringing us [kids] up Catholic” and “[Mom] was not afraid to challenge.” Anne sees her Catholic faith, woven in with her Aboriginal ancestors, as a “gift given to me by my mother.” She also understands her Catholic faith through the stories and lens of her grandmother, including her grandmother’s residential school experiences. Bronwyn’s mom, a victim of domestic violence, heightened her daughter’s awareness of patriarchy and feminism, arming her with a feminist voice of justice: “I had a strong sense of justice . . . [It was evident that] men had power in the world and in the church.” Findings of my study align with Findlen’s (2001) statement: “Women born during and since the time of the women’s movement have been given “the legacy of high expectations . . . and the message that ‘you can do anything’” (p. xiv). Sources of these messages were parents and teachers, and watching barriers being removed (Findlen, 2001).
My study draws similarities to Perrin’s (2013) study of young evangelical women who looked to females rather than males as peers to support their faith lives. Interestingly, my study also draws similarities to Madsen’s (2012) research exploring the childhoods of female leaders in universities. Madsen (2012) found that participants’ identities were shaped by the positive influence of women during their early years including female friends, family, religious leaders, and teachers. Findings from my study, combined with those in literature, provide insight into women’s identity negotiation in sacred and secular patriarchal institutions, and a woman’s ability and willingness to stay and negotiate. When faced with adversity, the spiritual and feminist ethics and beliefs of female family members can be a powerful resource from which women can draw.

Influence of church. Spiritual and religious identity development is influenced by context and culture (Ecklund, 2006; Dillon, 1999; Fuist, 2016). Women in my study grew up in the church during Vatican II and the influence of the freedom of this new culture and their new interpretation of “being Catholic” flows through their narratives. Participants learned that while traditionalism and patriarchy were still very present in the church they had agency. Though they were aware of gender barriers, their experiences (with the exception of Bronwyn) were mostly positive. Participants also talked about the influence of feminism and females within the religious structure: Maria, for example, was influenced by the new leadership of a new culture of feminist women religious inspired by Vatican II. Madsen (2012), too, found that early experiences with women in religious settings were instrumental in shaping female university leaders. Anne spoke about “girl power” and how becoming the first girl altar server in her church gave her access to “an exclusive boys club.” Bronwyn, whose experience of church was very oppressive, spoke of having a
heightened awareness that power imbalances at home and at church gave her: “It made me rebellious from day one.” The feminist ethos of Canadian Catholic and feminist women in Holtmann’s (2008) study was also shaped by Vatican II reforms: “These early experiences of religious resistance and the acceptance of differences coupled with changes to institutional teachings were very significant in the development of the Catholic feminist consciousness of these women” (Holtmann, 2008, p. 205). Other studies (Dillon, 1999; Leming, 2007) cited the changes of Vatican II and the sense of freedom and agency created by the reforms as influencing identity construction of their studies’ participants.

Choosing to negotiate. Participants were faced with situations of conflict between their feminist and spiritual identities as girls or young women. Notably, all of these conflicts were related to issues of morality and gender. It is in these experiences that each of them consciously made the decision to remain Catholic and redraw their Catholic identity by challenging unjust practices, beliefs, and structures, and reconstructing a vision of Catholicism that aligns with their identities.

Drawing on Bhabha’s (1994) “in-between” or “interstitial” (p. 5) space is one way to explore the decision-making process of these women. English (2004) interprets the experiences of female international aid workers negotiating feminism, Christianity, and westernism using the concept of “in-between” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5) space. Rita Nakashima Brock (2007) suggests that we form identities based on the various pieces of our history and the way we respond to them through the process of interstitial integrity:

Interstitial integrity describes the construction of self by humans in any culture. We draw life from every relationship in our lives. We are imprinted with the voices that give us language, the emotional inflections we enact, the ways we examine the world and interact
with it, and the knowledge that we come to make our own. . . . We are constituted by these complex relationships to the world as we internalize them. (p. 136)

As seen in the previous two themes, influence of family and influence of church, all of these women’s early experiences – both positive or negative – shape their decisions and inform their identities. In this “in-between” space (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5), they innovatively weave together pieces of their past into their current identities to create something new.

In interstitial integrity, “openness and discernment go hand-in-hand” (Downie, 2014, p. 60). Laurie’s narrative speaks very directly to a discernment process, demonstrating that her decision contemplating all of her experiences was not made lightly: “I took a lot of time . . . weighing the pros and cons.” Anne’s process of discernment was grounded in years of participation in two different spiritual systems and an awareness of her agency in being able to choose: “I saw two different systems . . . , [but] because it was really important to be part of the church, I was like, ‘Ok, my role will be limited.’” Bronwyn had left the church, which felt too oppressive, but renegotiated her identity and decided to return when she saw the way women were shaping the church: “I just woke up more when I saw all the good things that women have done in the church.”

Choosing to negotiate invites a discussion on power. Foucault (1998) challenged the notion that power must always be understood as coercive, maintaining that people have agency: “Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it. . . . Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” (pp. 100-1). In their decision to choose to remain in the church, or in the case of Bronwyn to return to the church, participants understand that an experience of coercive “power over” does not render them powerless.
In choosing to negotiate, participants have chosen to remain within the church despite their disagreements, maintaining an identity that is separate from, yet connected to, the communal tradition. Doing so does not require them to abandon their commitment to a global community, render them powerless, or require them to sacrifice their own differences and integrity. Their Catholicism allows for multiple, fluid, and dynamic identities that are constantly transforming in “varying sites of practice” (Leming, 2007, p. 88).

**Conflict and Constraint: Empowered by an Adaptive Sense of Self**

This theme parallels research showing the adaptability and flexibility of individuals to hold positions that differ from the Catholic institution and the strategies they use to negotiate those differences. It also demonstrates participants’ creativity and innovation in interpreting the tradition and resisting inequalities and injustices, and in doing so, reshaping something new. Themes include: articulating a vision; behaviours (revise, resist, dismiss); presence (visibility, invisibility); and (re)location and (re)discovery, which includes communities of discernment in her tradition and communities of discernment in difference.

**Articulating a vision.** All participants had a clear vision for their church. Most notably, their narratives included words like “free will,” “messy,” “flexible,” and “human” – a church that is less rule-oriented and restrictive, and more inclusive and open to a variety of ways to express Catholic and spiritual identity. Participants have optimism and hope for change; however, they are not blind to the injustices in their church.

Dillon’s (1999) study of pro-change Catholics involved in Catholic groups outside of church governance, referenced emancipatory politics as the impetus driving her participants to remain connected with the institution and push for institutional change. Emancipatory politics, as described by Giddens (1991), “liberat[es] individuals and groups from constraints which
adversely affect their life chances” (p. 210), with “justice, equality, and participation" as their focus (p. 6). Like the pro-change Catholics in Dillon’s (1999) study, participants are committed to Catholicism, but in that commitment lies the conviction that their church can undergo transformation. Findings from both studies show that Catholics who are feminist – feminist Catholic (activists from within the institution, like my study’s participants) or Catholic feminist (activists outside the institution who still retain some connection to the Catholic tradition) negotiate identity from a spectrum of standpoints and in a number of different ways (Dillon, 1999). Moreover, while they are highly aware that they sit on the margins of Catholicism, and are frustrated, angry, and deeply hurt, they choose not to remain rooted in the negativity. They use their position on the margins as motivation to carve out a more meaningful experience that aligns with their feminist identities and to work for transformation within their church.

In defining transformation for this study, I align myself with Leming’s (2007) understanding: “‘Transformation’ is not too big a claim if we understand it as the alteration of ‘form, shape, or appearance’. . . ., [which is] often a slow process that is difficult to detect” (p. 74). Narratives will highlight the transformative nature of participants’ actions and beliefs. Also in agreement with feminists in Leming’s (2007) study, these participants are realistic and pragmatic, aware

of the objective conditions of their social positioning in church, particularly as they see it differentiated from men’s positioning. They also have a subjective awareness of the significance of their position in terms of the limits and possibilities it poses. (p. 75)

Behaviours (revise, resist, dismiss). Participants in my study negotiate identity by revising, resisting, and dismissing certain practices or teachings that they disagree with. In doing so, they are not only transforming their experiences of Catholicism, but allowing for the
possibility of an identity that is both feminist and spiritual. They continue to participate in the larger community, yet express alternative religious practices and alternative beliefs, by changing ritual and language. Literature demonstrates that this is a very common strategy among feminists and pro-change individuals (Hilkert, 1993; Leming, 2007; Ozarak, 1996; Winter et al., 1995). A source of tension for Bronwyn and Laurie was the notion of God as male and the interpretation of scripture in the absence of a female lens. Both participants revise the words spoken during the Mass. Said Laurie: “I try to throw in my inclusive language.” Bronwyn “tr[ies] very hard not to use the word ‘He’ when [she] speak[s] of God.” Participants also strategically employ silence or ignore certain prayers and words. Maria, for example, resists recent changes to prayers spoken during the Mass: “I say the originals.”

Similar to my findings, concerns with language during the Mass, including the omission of gender-inclusive language most notably with respect to the recent Mass changes, has been expressed by other Canadian feminist Catholics. In their letter to Canadian Catholic bishops, members of Catholic Network for Women’s Equality (CNWE, 2017) argue that “this [new] translation [of the missal] is seriously flawed, due to its awkward and obscure language, its narrow vision of humanity and God, and its omission of inclusive language.” The group also maintains that the translation promotes a judgmental rather than merciful God, and that its obscure language is particularly difficult for children and individuals new to the English language.

Literature (Zwissler, 2012) also shows that gender-inclusive language is important to many feminists in different areas of the world and among different denominations, such as those participating in Judaism, Islam, and other forms of Christianity. However, Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan (2005) addresses inclusive language from the perspective of Christian
women in the Third World. While Kwok (2005) does not diminish the relevance of language and the difficulty many women experience in having to identify with a masculine God, she asserts that “language has not been the primary concern of women in the Third World” and that efforts around gender justice must also take into account an individual’s “sociopolitical struggles” (p. 130).

This theme also raises questions about individualism. One might assume that participants are practicing an independent spirituality concerned only with their own personal agenda. Such thinking would align with “Sheilaism” (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985), or what Baggett (2009) coins an “atomized ‘do-it-yourself’ style of meaning-making” (p. 125) in which scholars suggested individual practices are indicative of a private, personal belief system separate from the institution. Participants’ personal practices and ways of performing rituals, however, do not suggest that they hold purely individualistic beliefs. Their practices very much have a relational aspect and are tied to a larger commitment to God through the Catholic tradition, as is illuminated by Anne’s narrative as she spoke about choosing to revise certain rituals and language: “God knows where I'm at. . . . I don't call it picking and choosing, but I think some people would.” Participants creatively find ways to practice a very personal spirituality connected to their feminist values and their shared communal Catholic identity. They negotiate identity by being “connected to, but not closed in, by tradition” (Downie, 2014, p. 61). They also view “identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process” (Hall, 2003, p. 234). As Anne described: “I give myself the freedom and space to be who I want to be and when I want to be.”

The church’s position on women’s sexuality and relationships was the greatest source of identity conflict for all five participants. Kim maintained that “the church has no place in that.”
Maria voiced strongly that “it's inconceivable that the decisions [around women’s sexuality] should be made by men. . . . It’s oppression! It's the negation of a woman's right to decide. But women did and do decide. They leave the church.” These women’s sentiments mirror the sentiments of feminist Catholic women in New Brunswick who are no longer active in communal practice: “[Participants] disliked the condemning tone of church leaders, and they disagreed with Catholic teachings on such things as divorce, women, and homosexuality” (Holtmann, 2011, pp. 148-149)

What was notable is that during the interviews, four participants referenced “leaving the church,” though “leaving” may not necessarily suggest severing Catholic identity. Bronwyn, for example, left the church, then returned, and considered leaving again, but is aware of her agency and knows she can leave if she chooses: “If I need to walk, to talk with my feet, then I need to do that. It’s my choice.” For Laurie, who does not regularly attend Mass, leaving the parish setting is not the same as leaving “the faith” (see the presence section, Chapter 4. p. 44). Participants understand that their identities are neither fixed nor static, but rather fluid and negotiable. This knowledge affords them the freedom to move fluidly around and between the boundaries of their identities, as well as freedom in how they choose to practice their agency and how they shape their beliefs.

**Presence (visibility and invisibility).** This theme draws on the concepts of visibility and invisibility (Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Simpson & Lewis, 2007) to show how participants negotiate identity by finding various ways to “claim their space” (Leming, 2007, p. 85) as a way to counter gender stereotypes and the under-representation of women’s voices in the church. What is notable is that literature shows women leaders in patriarchal workplaces also deploy these strategies as ways to negotiate power and gender imbalances, including having a greater
visible and vocal presence, and being less visible – “operating behind the scenes” (Stead, 2013, p. 75).

Participants in my study employed both strategies. Laurie and Bronwyn construct ways to effect change through their visibility. While Laurie feels women’s ordination to the priesthood is important, she strategically focuses her efforts through her workshops and presentations on driving changes she feels are relevant and achievable: “I firmly believe that there is no theological reason why women cannot be ordained. . . . But I am not going to sit around and wait for that. I am just going to do the work that I think is important.” Her statement parallels the urgency that motivates feminist Catholics in Leming’s (2007) study who also “do the work” to challenge barriers while at the same time “mov[ing] toward the mysteries of God” (p. 79).

Bronwyn’s choice of words, in which she says her “call” is to support women with a message of love and compassion, suggests she sees her work with and for women as inspired from God: “Women who have left the church have come to me with their pain.” Kim employed visibility in her former role as lay minister. Ministering to her parish in a space and role normally reserved for the male priest provided her with an opportunity to lead the congregation with “the feminine face of God” (English, 1999, p. 308), and minister in a way that upholds her feminist ethos.

Maria’s narrative reflects how she shifts between visibility and invisibility, depending on the parish culture. While as a young woman she had been vocal about change, Maria now uses the power of invisibility as a strategy to initiate change in a more closed church culture: “[Women] need a voice on broader issues. But rather than the strident female voice, I believe in the power behind the throne.” Currently Kim intentionally self-excludes from some ministries following her removal as lay minister upon arrival of a new priest. Even through the power of
invisibility manifested by this action, she continues to reinforce a feminist message promoting inclusivity and respect, and rejection of the church’s exclusivity.

    Literature showed similar strategies of identity negotiation among feminists in religious settings (Gervais, 2011; Ecklund, 2005; Leming, 2007). Ecklund (2005) found higher satisfaction among feminist Catholic women who felt they had “voice” (p. 145) and the ability to make changes in their parish. Her study drew on Hirschman’s (1970) organizational theory of exit, voice, and loyalty, which proposes that people are able to remain part of an organization, even if they have disagreements with it, if they are afforded the ability to create change. The study concluded that women who see identity as negotiated, rather than fixed, are more likely to feel they have agency in interpreting their Catholic beliefs. They are able to “express,” rather than “suppress” (Ecklund, 2005, p. 146) disagreements.

    Participant narratives also suggest that these women seek to dispel stereotypes by employing various forms of unofficial activism to offer a female view and example of Christian leadership. While they are not connected to any collective organized reform group, their activism is manifested in the ways they interpret more inclusive and less narrow forms of worship, prayer, and practices; in their efforts to shape and construct more inclusive and compassionate spaces for women; and in their commitment to deconstruct practices and ideologies that are limiting and harmful. This invites a discussion on stereotype threat theory (Steele, 1997). This theory holds that when people are influenced by negative stereotypes about performance expectations for their group, they can underperform at tasks (Steele, 1997). Research has shown that under stereotype threat, women in sport, for example, performed worse than men (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). Training females to think about outstanding women who have succeeded in sports is suggested as a possible way to reduce stereotype threat (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). Perrin’s (2013) study
of young Evangelical women raises insights about the effects of the “male-norm” in shaping how
girls identify with symbols in religion. In her mixed-method study, Perrin (2013) found that
while the women looked up to females as role models in their everyday lives, they were more
influenced by male biblical role models. The study concluded that as girls, they had been given
more exposure to male biblical characters and were presented with more passive
characterizations of females in the Bible. Because they grew up socialized to value
egalitarianism within society, they did not identify with the female characters.

Narratives show how these women exert their authority and their influence to try and
counter these stereotypes. Bronwyn, for example, leads retreats to “try to skew things towards
the God of love.” Laurie, too leads workshops on spirituality directed to females, and is “do[ing]
the work . . . even if that might mean being on the margins of the structure.” Maria spoke about
being very vocal in shaping a more egalitarian culture in her past parishes, though even today, in
a different parish situation, she seeks ways to influence that are less visible. Narratives suggest
that participants are aware of their agency in determining not only their own experience of
Catholicism, but the experiences of others, and they employ strategies of visibility and
invisibility to do so. Like the women in Leming’s (2007) study, they are “construct[ing]
opportunities to influence church practice and . . . creat[ing] spaces within Catholicism that are
more woman-friendly . . . , open[ing] up new vistas for themselves and others of what
Catholicism can be” (p. 77).

Findings from English’s (1999) study of six women lay leaders in parishes where priests
were not available has important implications for understanding how the feminist ethos and
spirituality of women in my study, when manifested through their leadership and their ministries,
can dispel stereotypes and lead to transformation within the church. Through a distinctly
feminine leadership style that was inclusive, collaborative, and non-hierarchical, these women shifted the culture in their parishes through their “positive influence on parishioner thinking and practice” (English, 1999, p. 300). Parishioners were more engaged in decision-making and more collaborative, and most responded openly to concept of female-led parishes (English, 1999). Despite these successes, English (1999) is frank about the barriers and boundaries that persisted for the female lay leaders, recalling “their endless stories of how they were subtly repressed by [the rules] of the institutional church” (p. 308). Though only one participant in my study is a lay leader, English’s (1999) study provides important insights around the transformative abilities of women, including those in my study, to break through the stereotypes within the male-centered culture of the church.

Participants also discussed how their presence and agency within the church depended highly on the priest and the culture he had established within the parish, similar to Ecklund’s (2006) study of women leaders negotiating conservative and progressive parishes. While priests had authority in both cultures, how they used authority differed. In more progressive parishes, priests gave autonomy to male and female leaders and women reported having more agency, while in traditional congregations, women were seen as “placeholders” (Ecklund, 2006, p. 92). Bronwyn’s narrative, and the narratives of other participants throughout the interview, reveal that participants negotiate conflict with clergy and others leaders in the church by “approaching the system as people” (Henderson, 2006, p. 62). Bronwyn, for example, shows sensitivity to the challenges supportive priests also face in opening opportunities for women: “Even those [priests] who value us are bound by their vows. They can only do so much.” Understanding the different ways participants view the institution is necessary to understand how participants negotiate identity gender and spiritual identities (Ecklund, 2005). One part of the institution, the Vatican, is
the source of doctrine and teachings affecting women, while the other part is the more local level, where most women have an opportunity to make change (Ecklund, 2005). Henderson (2006) posits that when individuals look at the system as people and when they believe that people have the capacity to change, they feel the potential and opportunity for change is greater.

(Re)location and (re)discovery. In her study of women leaders of different religious denominations, Henderson (2006) draws on the concept of “holding environments” (p. 28) to describe how the leaders bring people together to address complex challenges, envision new approaches to problems, and work toward transformation in their organizations. Holding environments “have three functions: (a) confirming persons where they are, (b) contradicting, which involves letting go or introducing other kinds of possibilities, and (c) creating continuity by remaining in place during the period of transformation and growth” (Caldwell & Claxton, 2010, p. 10). All participants in my study are very adept at constructing holding environments to work through the tension between conflicting identities. They move around – within and outside their traditions – to learn, to be supported, to be challenged, and to grow, demonstrating a very relational aspect to constructing and negotiating identity. Their informal networks included individuals, mixed-gender groups, and female networks.

Participant narratives demonstrate a very intentional and interdependent approach to identity construction. While participants trust the authority within themselves, they also value external forms of authority to inform their decisions and their identities – including God and Creator. This approach aligns with those of the religious women leaders in Henderson’s (2006) study who lead by drawing on the strengths of those around them. Participants’ relationality with various communities is also synonymous with a relational post-colonial approach to religious identity construction. Fletcher (2003) proposes that we are shaped by a “web of identity” (p. 18),
in which all of the various strands of our identities weave and wind together in unique ways and webs. A mutuality and a relationality connect our identities, continually informing one another and shaping us in a multitude of ways (Fletcher, 2003). Our identities, then, are shaped not only by our own spiritual or religious traditions, but through our relations and our dialogue with other communities (Fletcher, 2003). Not only does this dispel the myth of a monolithic religious or spiritual identity, but the differences that make up these multiple facets of our identities provide numerous opportunities for “forging solidarities” (Fletcher, 2003, p. 19) beyond our own traditions.

**Communities of discernment within her traditions.** All participants spoke about their engagement in study, dialogue, and discernment personally and with a network of others within their spiritual traditions. Similarly, studies show that feminists in religions with patriarchal structures are pursuing a more in-depth understanding of their faith, often through independent studies. Muslim women, for example, embark on independent study of Islam to develop their own interpretations of the Qur’an separate from patriarchy (Mishra & Shirazi, 2010). Holtmann (2011) found that Canadian Catholic feminists belonging to the pro-change Catholic Network for Women’s Equality (CNWE) group in New Brunswick not only had additional theology education apart from catechism, but that “the more empowered they became through knowledge and faith, the more disempowered and alienated they felt because of institutional barriers” (p. 145). Muslim females in leadership engage in further study of religious traditions to build solid cases and “better arguments” (Henderson, 2006, p. 120) in opposition to patriarchy.

**Communities of discernment through difference.** Study participants expand the boundaries of their spiritual identities by engaging with other religious and spiritual traditions as a way of achieving spiritual maturity and deepening their own understandings of the Divine. This
“mixing and hybridity of religions” (Ammerman, 2014, p. 193), however, does not mean having to abandon their own tradition and beliefs. Laurie engages in yoga as a spiritual exercise, yet it presents no conflict with, or threat to, her Catholic identity. While she shares experiences in other traditions by embracing what she understands to be “permeable boundaries between established Christian communities and the larger culture” (Ammerman, 2013, p. 271), she maintains a spiritual identity grounded in Catholicism while honouring the truths of other traditions. “Whatever I practice, it’s always sort of rooted in the Catholic tradition.” Anne belongs to two spiritual traditions. She moves fluidly back and forth between her Indigenous and Catholic spiritual identities: “In my Catholic faith, I’ve gone to silent retreats. As part of my spiritual faith, I also go to vision quests, sweats, [and] sundances.”

Literature shows feminist spiritualities are at ease in seeking spiritual resources from other traditions (Schneiders, 2004; Winter et al., 1995; Zwissler, 2007). Winter et al.’s (1995) study of over 7000 feminist US Catholic and Protestant women found that “feminist spirituality groups are more likely to be outside of denominational and congregational structures” (p. 147). Groups’ purposes are varied and mostly appeal to women around age fifty (Winter et al., 1995, p. 147). Scholars (Clifford, 2014; Winter et al., 1995) also found that feminist women often identify more with women who belong to denominations other than their own.

Likewise, Manning’s (1997) research of liberal and conservative Catholic women showed that differences in the way they understood their identities has resulted in divisions among them. Unlike their Protestant counterparts who can easily move to another Protestant denomination when differences occur, Catholics do not often have that option. Studies (Holtmann, 2011; Manning, 1997) suggest that there are few opportunities within the church for open discussions around the conflict women experience navigating identity in the church.
Manning (1997) suggests that because women with different views sit shoulder-to-shoulder in the pews, there is a higher possibility of finding unity – *not uniformity* (my emphasis) – in difference. Three participants in my study expressed concerns with traditional Catholics who are rigid in their views and/or with fundamentalist extremists. Bronwyn “really object[s] to the exclusivity in the church. [She] think[s] that it’s reflective of the radical fundamentalism that seems to be part of the world and part of our church.” Participants, however, demonstrated a feminist spiritual ethic of connection, inclusiveness, and openness to vulnerability, while continuing to trust in their own authority – “my truth.” Their narratives show a conscious effort to reach out in a way that encourages dialogue while maintaining their integrity. Said Bronwyn: “I have to understand there are many roads to God. The conservative road is a road too. But I have to know my truth, and not be threatened by, or afraid of, people that think differently.”

**Embracing the Wisdom (Through Her Lens)**

The previous super-ordinate theme focused on the areas of conflict between participants’ feminist and spiritual identities and uncovered how participants navigate this conflict and negotiate parts of the tradition as they carve out a Catholic identity that is less explicitly articulated by the tradition. This super-ordinate theme – embracing the wisdom (through her lens) – focuses on those encounters with God through their Catholic tradition that more easily resonate with their feminist and spiritual identities. What is particularly notable about the following narratives is that while participants reflect on the most meaningful and empowering parts of the tradition, their words do not center around a cognitive description of belief structures, teachings, or doctrine; rather, they speak about a more experiential, embodied, and emotional expression of the Divine and the sacred – lived religion (Ammerman, 2016). Occurring both inside religious institutions and outside, these “experiences of both the body and
the mind. . . in everyday life. . . [include] looking wherever and however we find people invoking a sacred presence” (Ammerman, 2014, p. 191). Ammerman (2016) notes that it is particularly interesting to study women’s embodiment of the sacred, considering the body has been a highly contested area of regulation in religion. Throughout the following narratives, participants narratives show they wear their feminist and spiritual identities in tandem.

God as trust and groundedness (soul speak). Speaking about their relationship with the Creator and God invoked profound emotion, both peacefulness and joy, in participants. This meeting of “self” and “other” (Divine) is lived out in their spiritual practices, spaces, and their everyday lives, and inspires a sense of trust and groundedness. Their narratives illuminate a more embodied and enacted experience of their faith (Ammerman, 2016; Ammerman, 2014). While outsiders might not understand or see these behaviours as being sacred, to those engaged in them, these experiences are very sacred. This insight increases our understanding of the “breadth and depth” (Ammerman, 2014, p. 193) of religion.

Kim spoke about feeling grounded and a sense of peace, describing an embodied experience of the Eucharist and an emotional experience invoked being present within a church space: “Yeah, this is where I need to be. I cannot explain it.” In the absence of regular place of worship and receiving the sacraments, Laurie connects to her “spiritual home” through her religious artifact collection, which, she said, “keeps me rooted in my faith, in my spirituality, in my church.” Anne is “grounded” in her Indigenous and Catholic spiritualities through “sound, music, and chanting.” For Bronwyn, the sacred connected to her tradition is found outside the tradition: “It’s in music, in nature – God is just everywhere.”

Winter et al.’s, (1995) study showed that, in spite of the anger and frustration feminist Protestants and Catholics feel with their church, they continue to identify with their religious
traditions, which are very important to them. Liturgy, and the connection it creates, was “critically important” (Winter et al., 1995, p. 106) for many Catholics in their study, particularly when the language and rituals were inclusive. Literature also shows that even feminists who have separated from their religious institutions still feel compelled to incorporate some forms of rituals carried from those traditions into their everyday lives (Aune, 2015). Some feminists cite a connection to history and childhoods through religious rituals (Aune, 2015). Others fused different traditions together, which Vincent (2008) coined “fusers” (p. 133), such as Buddhist Anglican or Christianity and paganism.

Though participants in my study are still connected to the church, and feminists in Aune’s (2015) study no longer associate with an institution, our findings show similarities. Both groups draw from an embodied experience of religious rituals, places, and icons to develop a meaningful, grounded spirituality practiced in their everyday lives. Participants in my study are able to align their feminist and spiritual identities with their religious beliefs, ritual, and practices in an embodied experience that is empowering, lifegiving, and identity-affirming.

**Spiritual and feminist role models (herstory).** One identity negotiation strategy participants used was finding empowerment through identifying with Catholic history, but a larger vision of that story that includes feminist role models. Interestingly, the three participants who named female role models cited women that have been celebrated for their faith, intellect, entrepreneurism, and commitment to both social justice and a richer theology, as well as their willingness to challenge authority. Drawing out these stories, they demonstrate that not all women in church history express femininity in the same way. Participants used the words “support,” “comforting,” “they are so much like me,” “they spoke their minds,” and “they were strong” when speaking of these role models.
Said Laurie: “I remember as a kid reading all these stories about saints, and it was all these guys. I didn’t really connect.” Anne talked of how meaningful it was to have her Indigenous culture and an Indigenous woman recognized in church history, and she spoke about being inspired by St. Kateri, well before the Indigenous woman had been named a saint: “Nobody knew who she was, but I knew.” Her narrative aligns with a post-colonial approach to feminist theology, which asserts that feminist theology must focus on more than just gender (Kwok, 2005).

Perrin (2013) notes how sociology and psychology have shown the value of role models that people can identify with, particularly when they feel marginalized. Participants in studies of feminist Catholic women negotiating identity in the church drew on the inspiration of many role models cited by participants in my study (Leming; 2007; O’Connor, 2010). By very intentionally seeking out and linking the identities and experiences of these feminist Catholic role models with their own identities, participants are able to establish a connection with the Catholic tradition in a way that aligns with their feminist ethos and moves them to activism. In essence, it is an effort to “read ourselves within and against how we have been written” (Willinsky, 1998, p. 264).

The Jesus of justice and inclusivity. Literature shows the identities of feminist Catholics are rooted in scripture that is faithful to Jesus (Schneiders, 2004). While Jesus is a central figure to all Catholics, feminist Catholic identities are rooted in the liberating and inclusive message and ministry of Jesus as a source of empowerment and a resource in their resistance against exclusion (Holtmann, 2008; Schneiders, 2004). Participants in my study also spoke about the centrality of Jesus as a source of inspiration and liberation for women. Bronwyn, whose experience of the Divine growing up had been one of judgement, spoke of Jesus’ message as a role model of love and compassion: “To try to love God as best as we understand God, to try
and love one another, and to support one another.” Participants also spoke of Jesus as liberator, using His example as a critique against patriarchy and exclusion. Anne’s talks about Jesus as a “role model” of justice: “I didn't see a hierarchy in who Jesus surrounded Himself with.” The Jesus she role models was political and held people accountable for injustices: “I think He would be, ‘Oh, for crying out loud people!’” These women are able to align their values with their Catholic identity by distinguishing an identity rooted in a theology of an inclusive and loving Jesus from those parts of the church they feel are unjust and exclusive. It is a political Jesus that inspires them to call for the best from their religion.

Community and connection. In an exploration of avenues of women’s religious rituals, Northrup (1997) found that “one of the most effective political aspects of ritualization is its ability to draw people together into a group, to create community to communicate common grievances, values and goals, and to forge the group into a unified source for change” (p. 94). Scholars of lived religion (Aune, 2015; McGuire, 2016) suggest there is a communal relational aspect to ritual. McGuire (2016) posit that rituals and practices heighten our spirituality, connecting us to memories of our religious traditions and of our pasts, by embodying our beliefs, and engaging not just our physical senses, but our communal senses. Through the shared experience of ritual, individuals become more attuned to one another, creating a sense of community (McGuire, 2016).

The word “community” and “connection” occurred frequently in participant narratives. Two participants spoke to the power of connection in religious artifacts passed down from family. Through these items they linked their own spiritual identities with those of their family and to the greater Catholic community. Said Laurie: “It's part of my spiritual heritage and I get strength from that. I know. It's weird.” It may seem curious that while the women in my study
who have struggled to “be church” (Winter et al., 1995, p. 187) within the institution – to find and create spaces that are inclusive and honour women’s experiences and challenges – they spoke about the Mass, fellow parishioners, and the Eucharist as a key source of inspiration and support. They find the sacred in actions, people, and the sacraments, which they described as “together mak[ing] a difference,” “sense of community,” “support,” and “cohesive.” Kim talked of God’s presence in community: “But it’s also a place where people come together in prayer, knowing God’s presence is in that space and in the Body of Christ.” Considering that for many feminists, the Mass can be a place where they encounter exclusion from the language and the altar, their ability and agency to interpret the rituals in a way that is meaningful and aligns with their feminist identities (see the behaviours section in Chapter 5, p. 70) allows for a meaningful experience within the Catholic tradition. It is in these personal, interpreted, and embodied experiences, which take place within the Catholic institutional setting, that the women’s identities become more institutionally-affiliated. Their communal identity is strongest in the core rituals, practices, and sacraments, and it is here where they find some common ground, even while experiencing them in very personal ways. This aligns with Manning’s (1997) assertion that merely sitting and being among one another in the pews may help reduce identity conflict: “The moderating tendency may help prevent total alienation as both sides seek to find a common language to communicate with each other” (p. 387).

Literature shows that the Mass, the Eucharist, and community, in particular, are very important for many women (Leming, 2007; Winter et al., 1995). Even women who have separated from the institution, abandoning what they consider patriarchal rituals, create community through their own inclusive liturgies and celebrations of worship (Schneiders, 2004). Laurie’s narrative is very telling of the power of community and the relational communal parts
of Catholicism that align with participant identities. She intentionally does not place herself in the parish setting, though she still remains active in the church. While she does strive to create community and connection in other ways, she speaks to her sense of loss of the part of her spiritual identity connected to tradition and to the Catholic community: “And I guess that's what I miss the most. There's two things: I miss the sacraments and I miss the community.”

The Medium is the Message: Feminist Spirit Embodied

This section looks at how participants negotiate feminist and spiritual identities in their secular lives. Narratives demonstrate that participants do not separate their identities as they move between the sacred and the secular domains as is seen in “It’s in my bones” and “from the pew to the boardroom.”

“It’s in my bones.” In a study of religious women leaders, participants move easily between what Henderson (2006) calls a “church-state membrane” (p. 171). They do not compartmentalize their identities, but move about fluidly between different identities, bringing together all strands of their identities into all areas of their lives (Henderson, 2006). Just as Laurie’s identities have been informed by her experiences and decisions, her identities inform and shape all parts of her life. She speaks about a spiritual identity and her connection to the Catholic tradition as experienced in a very physical way: “I am always going to be Catholic. It's in my bones.”

Similar to the discernment process in interstitial integrity (Brock, 2007), Anne talked about discernment – sorting through the strands that make up identity – as a “filter”:

My Indigenous and Catholic spirituality is quite a blend. . . . My faith is at the core of me. It guides me and how I act in my life. . . . The real world includes the religious and the
spiritual to me. . . . [These] have to be able to somehow mesh, and I have to go through a process to sort that out. It's like a filter.

Kim’s narrative showed the tension she experienced when faced with critical comments by colleagues who knew she was Catholic and claimed that part of her identity contradicted her professional identity: “[Some colleagues] didn’t understand how I managed the two roles. . . . My life purpose matches up with my core values . . . , which probably don't align with all church teachings.” Kim negotiates identity by honouring the authority within herself. Downie (2014) maintains that a feminist spiritual approach to identity construction is not only having an openness to others, but in being open to oneself, one can “develop personal autonomy” (p. 61). Like the feminist Catholic activists in English’s (2004) study, Kim is sitting in a space where she refuses to accept one identity over the other and resists the labeling and the negative aspects of both. “None of us is reducible to one identifier, including affiliation to a faith tradition” (Downie, 2014, p. 61).

**From the pew to the boardroom.** In Manning’s (1999) study of conservative religious women, findings showed that some women compartmentalized their different identities, holding traditional identities in the worship space and feminist identities within their workplaces. Participants in my study were comfortable managing the “intermingling” (English, 2004, p. 124) of their professional, spiritual, and feminist identities. Four of the five participants spoke about their professional leadership roles in their workplaces as “service” or “servant leadership.” Their leadership is centered on relationality, inclusivity, responsibility to others, and action – ethics at the root of feminist spirituality (Schneiders, 2004). Notably, the kinds of cultures they aim to cultivate in their workplaces are those same cultures they seek in their church.
Narratives showed a strong connection between the way participants spoke about their actions in the workplace and their spirituality. In essence, they are “practicing religion” (Aune, 2015, p. 140), taking their beliefs out of the institution and embodying them in their workspaces and everyday lives. This way of “living religion” is informed by all parts of their identities, and no separation occurs between their spiritual and feminist identities and other parts of their lives (Fletcher, 2003). Anne’s spirituality – her Indigenous spiritual identity and her institutionally-affiliated Catholic spiritual identity – is central to her secular life: “The humility, the honesty, the Beatitudes that Jesus taught are mirrored in the Seven Sacred Teachings of our Aboriginal elders – [and the] kindness. These are things I define myself by.” Similar to feminist activists in English’s (2004) study, Maria’s institutionally-affiliated identity is not as apparent in the workplace as in the church as she does not openly identify herself as Catholic. Her language of Catholicism, however, is spoken through her actions, which are shaped by the “intermingling” (English, 2004, p. 124) of all of her identities. Said Maria: “I think [colleagues] would say I am spiritual, not Catholic.” Bronwyn’s “service-oriented” leadership style is informed by her spiritual and feminist identities to “empower” employees and address inequities. Laurie discussed her leadership role as an extension of her faith lived in everyday life: “I think service is just a huge part of how I understand my faith, and I like it. Service – being out in the community, not just in the church.”

Conclusion

This study, by nature of IPA, analyzed the narratives of a small group of Roman Catholic women negotiating feminist and spiritual identities. Through in-depth interviews, the study found that participants see the possibility of not only remaining within the Catholic Church and embracing both feminist and Catholic/spiritual identities; these women have also constructed
ways to engage in the church in meaningful and varied ways. Because of their openness to the potential and possibilities that can arise when being both Catholic/spiritual and feminist, they resist the labeling, stereotypes, and limitations imposed on them within and outside the church, and they reject only identifying as either feminist or Catholic/spiritual. Their identities are fluid and dynamic, and participants are continually and willingly engaged in a process of interpreting what it means to be a feminist Catholic. Like the feminist Catholic activists in English’s (2004) study, each participant’s identities continuously intermingle together: sometimes a participant’s spiritual identity is more evident, while other times, depending on the context, her feminist identity is more apparent. Though the five women are all aware that choosing to be a feminist Catholic can be a place of tension – a place of controversy and conflict that can seem like somewhat of a tug-o-war between identities – they consciously use this space of ambiguity and ambivalence in a very innovative way. In this space, they actively construct and negotiate multiple, fluid, and dynamic identities that both collide with each other and “talk” to one another. By drawing on the wisdom of both identities to find new ways of being a feminist Catholic, these five women work toward remapping and reshaping a more just, compassionate, and inclusive church and society. Rejecting dualities and polarities opens them up to new ideas and more creative ways of being, thinking, understanding, and believing, as well as new ways to conceptualize transformation.

Some aspects of Catholicism have significantly disappointed, marginalized, and limited these participants, just as some parts of society – including their workplaces – have labeled them with fixed and static identities. Because parts of the tradition hold deep meaning for them, they have chosen to maintain a close connection with the faith, while sitting lightly to the institution (Schneiders, 203, p. 177). Through thoughtful, continual, and very intentional processes of
discernment, and the filtering and sorting of all of their experiences, they refuse to remain rooted in negativity, seeing these as not the whole of their experience.

It seems that being on the margins of Catholicism offers them a unique vantage point, where they adeptly – though certainly not without difficulty – negotiate ambiguity and ambivalence. For these five women, the political is woven into their spiritual and feminist identities. While their activism does not take place in any official capacity with any particular pro-change group, as feminists and as Catholics inspired by the justice-oriented praxis of Jesus, their conscientisation and growing awareness of structural and ideological injustices, and a trust in their own authority and agency, has inspired them to critique the injustices and inequalities in the church. Depending on the context and circumstance, their political agendas may be more public and vocal, while at other times, more subtle; for all, however, negotiating identity is an exercise of emancipation with the goal of transformation. Participants seek to break down “walls” of injustices and limitations where they are able, and to reimagine and reshape a more inclusive and incarnated spirituality and experience of the tradition. Central to embracing both a spiritual and feminist identity when remaining in the church, however, is both their hope in the possibility for a tradition that invites their full-participation in a way that is meaningful and relevant to them and their ability to be agentic in shaping that transformation. They are strategic and realistic in their efforts and their goals. Being a feminist Catholic requires them to focus their energies on areas where they feel they have the most capacity to influence and to be sustained by the tradition, and to recognize that they may need to shift their energies.

Participants seek to influence and reform the tradition in a number of ways. By engaging in more personal, gendered interpretations of the tradition, they are able to strategically and innovatively adapt parts of the tradition to the realities of their feminist and spiritual lives. To an
outsider, these may not be apparent, and their spiritual identity may be seen as very traditional
and monolithic. This new understanding of how feminist Catholics experience their faith and
negotiate within the tradition, however, presents a much broader view of how we understand
Catholic women’s identities and even the religion itself; participants are imprinting their feminist
identities upon their tradition, shaping and influencing it in varied ways. They are creating new
truths and new possibilities about what it means to be Catholic.

Participants also shape reform in the Catholic tradition by creating more feminine spaces
within the institution. In doing so, they are interrupting the male influences in the tradition. They
see the possibilities of being a feminist Catholic, inspired in part by the example of feminist
Catholic females from their own pasts, especially family. As well, they are inspired and liberated
by the feminist Catholic women – and for one woman, an Indigenous Catholic woman – who
have played an influential role in Catholic history. By recovering and reimagining women’s
histories and weaving those stories with their own identities as feminist Catholics, they are
making space for these figures within the tradition. Drawing on their authority and agency, some
participants also seek to open up spaces for women by putting a feminine face on parish
ministries through their active engagement in various ministries. Participants also claim
ownership of their church and their Catholic tradition by seeking out opportunities to influence
and carve out more inclusive, compassionate, and justice-oriented spaces in various locations
within the institution where women’s realities can be better understood and respected.

By engaging in a more embodied expression of their tradition, feminist Catholics are
shifting and expanding what it means to be Catholic and what it means to be religious and/or
spiritual. For these participants, being a feminist Catholic within the institution is not centered
around adhering or conforming to doctrine, teachings, and practices. These parts of the tradition
are not lightly dismissed; rather, they are thoughtfully discerned and negotiated, with participants focused on a more embodied and action-oriented personal expression of their beliefs. This embodied expression of their faith takes place inside and outside the church, weaving the sacred with the various areas of their lives.

The actions of these women as leaders in the workplace challenge the notion of a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, and a distinctly spiritual identity fixed within the religious sphere. Their leadership roles are an extension of their feminist and spiritual/religious beliefs. As they do within their religious spaces, they negotiate the many different strands of their identities, living them out as an embodied and experiential spirituality in all locations and all areas of their lives. Through their leadership styles, participants are shaping society and their workplaces by modeling a spirituality that is connected to their tradition and that reflects their feminist and spiritual values, morals, and beliefs.

Looking at the various possibilities for transformation when these women embrace both feminist and spiritual identities while remaining in the church expands our understanding of how women are creating change within systems in and outside the church that may or may not be overtly apparent. It highlights ways that women’s practices, beliefs, and informal actions can influence power and innovation, and begin to shape cultures and gradually catalyze reform within particular contexts and areas within the Catholic Church.

As can be seen, identity negotiation for these participants is very creative, intentional, relational, and locational. “Sit[ting] lightly” (Schneiders, 2003, p. 177) on the institution, and operating from different locations within the institution at different times of their lives, participants creatively engage with, and interpret their tradition. Their gender and their identities as feminists are central to this interpretation, and they claim the authority – by drawing on the
example of Christ and the multitude of their experiences – to negotiate with the tradition through a gendered lens. Participants also show an intentionality, commitment, and willingness to manage differences and ideological struggles with others in their communal tradition by seeking mutuality and dialogue, without striving for uniformity. While recognizing their ability and agency to confront power and injustices within parts of the system, they are also acutely aware of the limitations, and they admit they are not always successful. As such, they are both tenacious, yet vulnerable. While they selectively decide where they will direct their energies and honour their own agency and authority to do so, participants also acknowledge that “leaving” may be necessary for women, though not necessarily desirable, if remaining in the church becomes too personally destructive. “Leaving” holds different meanings for participants – meanings that do not suggest that one must relinquish their Catholic identity. Participants have demonstrated that being Catholic in the church takes place in a multitude of internal (within themselves) and external locations, and that leaving, rather, means shifting locations and reshaping identity. Identity as “a production . . . is never complete, always in process” (Hall, 2003, p. 234).

Participants’ identities are very relational. They approach systems as people, which allows them to engage more willingly with seeking change in the structure. They are relational, as well, in that they seek wisdom and support in a range of places and spaces. They are linked to the Divine in a deeply personal way, yet they have a very communal commitment to the Divine through their church. When refracted through the prism of their feminist lens, and lived out in an embodied way, the shared history, community, and memories and meaning behind the sacraments, prayers, and rituals are grounding and empowering. Participants are self-reflective. Embracing a feminist and Catholic identity for these participants means acknowledging that they are both knowing and not knowing, and they very intentionally create networks of self-discovery
– learning, worship, and discernment – moving through interconnected webs of lay and clergy, men and women, and women-only from within and outside their tradition. Common to feminist spiritualities, participants draw on other spiritualities and traditions, seeing wisdom of the Divine in “other,” though the ways participants’ identities weave with those traditions show great variation and complexity. Through their interactions with other traditions, they are opening up opportunities for conversation with these traditions. All participants have also pursued a deeper understanding of their own spiritual tradition(s), often independently through formal or informal studies. Narratives suggest this has heightened their awareness of their marginalized position in the church, yet also opened them up to new possibilities for experiencing and living out their feminist and spiritual identities.

As participants’ feminist and spiritual identities intersect and intermingle, women striving to be their authentic self, one that is rooted in Christ, are caught in a paradox of carrying the wisdom of both identities and working through the tension of ambiguity and ambivalence. These women’s commitment to a more democratic and inclusive church remains unquenched by a church not yet open to their full-participation; however, they are not waiting for that church – yet neither are they turning their backs on it. By identifying as both spiritual and feminist while remaining in the Catholic Church, they have gone beyond the linearity and the dualisms to demonstrate and open up new ways of being feminist and Catholic and envision new possibilities that emerge when embracing both. In the “not yet,” they see the potential and the possibilities in “it’s yet.”

**Limitations**

While this study provides richer understanding into the experiences of Canadian Roman Catholic women managing feminist and spiritual identities, important limitations exist.
Firstly, although the very small sample size is consistent with recommendations for IPA (Smith et al., 2009), the size and homogenous sample of mostly Caucasian middle- to upper-middle class, professional women with post-secondary educations produced descriptions that are not generalizable to all feminist Catholic women. This sample size, however, allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Catholic women manage their feminist and spiritual identities.

Secondly, I am a Caucasian woman with a limited understanding of Aboriginal world views. See Chapter 3 “Method” to view the steps that I took to improve researcher reliability. While I made every effort to represent the individual standpoints of all of the participants as authentically as possible, I acknowledge that my lived experiences and spiritual and feminist beliefs shape what I am studying and my approach to studying it. I, therefore, acknowledge my personal and cultural biases, knowing that I cannot separate from those.

Thirdly, women in this study were selected due to their personal experience with Vatican II and, as such, the research becomes a study of this generation. Research on younger generations may have produced different findings.

**Opportunities for further research**

The present study explored Canadian Catholic women navigating feminist and spiritual identities within the Catholic Church. All of the women in this study were over the age of 50. There is need to explore a more diverse voice among Catholic women. Shared voices bind women together, but at a time when the Vatican is calling for increased participation for women (Zagano, 2015), the vast majority of Catholic women are not invited to be part of this discussion. Identity research exploring a younger demographic of Canadian Catholic women would give voice to this group of women and provide insights as to how they negotiate their spiritual identities. This generation of young women have different social contexts that shape their ability
to perform various identities. Literature of Muslim women negotiating identity tends to focus on the young generation (Ali, 2005; Mishra & Shirazi, 2010), yet there appears to be a void within scholarship of identity development of young Catholic women negotiating a feminist ethos. How do their experiences differ or parallel women in my study?

Interpretive phenomenological analysis draws on small, fairly homogenous samples to acquire an in-depth understanding of the phenomena. Focus is more on the depth of the data, rather than the breadth (Smith et al., 2009). IPA provided these five participants the opportunity to share, in great length and detail, the meanings they attribute to their experiences of navigating feminist and spiritual identities in the Catholic Church. This approach allowed for their detailed commentary, and readers were able to get acquainted with the participants through their own words. Further research could extract specific findings of interest from this study using a different qualitative approach that would allow for a larger, more diverse sample of feminist Catholic women.

Research could also explore the experiences of Catholic women in Canada who are immigrants or new Canadians. Haji, Lalonde, Durbin, and Naveh-Benjamin (2011) suggest a causal relationship between religion and culture, with culture influencing rituals and beliefs, and religion influencing areas of everyday life. As our Canadian identity becomes more multifaceted and multidimensional – a reflection of our cultural, racial, and gender diversity – Catholic women’s beliefs, actions, and experiences influenced by the culture in their countries of origin, likewise should be reflected in identity studies of Canadian Catholic women.

Another opportunity for research is the intersectionality of gender, religion and spirituality, and leadership. All of the participants in this study discussed how their spiritual and feminist identities were intertwined with their professional leadership positions. Matz (2001)
states: “Women are entering professions and taking on leadership positions, and it is necessary to learn about those who have succeeded and what affected their growth and development” (pp. 3-4). It is vital for the advancement of women and the development of girls to understand the factors that lead to women’s success as leaders. Understanding the depth and diversity of women’s religious and spiritual beliefs and values, and how those shape women’s professional lives, is important if we are to tap into the leadership potential of women.

Finally, Wong (2010) discusses an “open ended” (p. 43) partnership of discovery between men and women to recognize and address women’s challenges, as she asserts that men must be conscious of how patriarchy impacts both men and women. An opportunity exists to explore ways to engage men lay and ordained men as supporters to help move women to full-participation within the church. Many participants in my study talked about the support they received from husbands and male friends – lay and clergy – as well as Catholic and non-Catholic. O’Connor (2010), too, noted that many feminist women in her study could name supportive men in their efforts to achieve equality in the church. Feminists working for the rights of abused women, a movement which began around the same time as contemporary feminist theologies, have only in the last decade or so begun examining the implications for engaging and mobilizing men to prevent violence against women (Funk, 2008). While there is a tension in focusing attention on men and inadvertently shifting attention away from women – as Anne stated in her narrative, “Men are our allies, but they are not our voices” – there may be important lessons to be learned by more deeply examining the role of men as allies.
References


Paul VI. (1976). Inter insigniores: Declaration on the question of admission of women to the ministerial priesthood. Retrieved from:


APPENDIX A: Participant definitions of feminism

Kim: I never really thought of [my view] as a feminist view. I would never have considered myself a feminist. I think maybe as I get older and more confident with who I am, I am more vocal in what I believe in. And I will stand up more for the rights of others and for what I believe in, rather than staying silent.

Maria: I believe that all women are feminists; however, I don't like the label as it suggests a separation – those who are and those who aren't. I believe that all women work together to achieve goals, to commune, and to share; I believe it's intrinsic to who women are, that it always has been and always will be. I'm often accused of having "too many male hormones" but those are simply the times when the tigress emerges – protecting my children, my cave, my rights – and every male I have ever known personally and professionally has backed away from the fangs. Essentially, I believe in taking a stand when one is needed. I'm not the type of woman – feminist – who will march in the streets, rail against men and how they oppress women. When I compare myself to blatantly Feminist women – note a capital – I find I have nothing in common with an angry public right that blames men for our problems. I work for change quietly and behind-the-scenes, creating ripples of change one person at a time.

Anne: I think of myself as a feminist because of the era I grew up in and my university education . . . [and] I am multiple cultural backgrounds. All my great grandmothers were alive growing up so I spent time with each of them learning their cultures, traditions, beliefs, and songs, and each of them was of a different faith. I grew up in a home that was interracial, in a home where my dad and mom were different denominations, so I think that has to do with my feminism. Right at an early age I got a choice. I got to pick the best of all the worlds, I've said, but I got to walk between the worlds. And so, being Métis, we always say the Métis person is the true Canadian
because they are the combination of, and they knew culture and traditions and religions as well, so they were able to walk the line, build bridges between people of different cultures, faith and religion. And I always see that in myself. So, for me, of course, I'm a feminist. I grew up in the 70s, I believe in girl power and I saw the songs that said that, the artists that said, "You can be anything you want to be". . . . Being a feminist to me, it's more about what the Aboriginal worldview is. For me, female power and male power are the two opposites to make a whole. And so, when I think about what we need in this world to be healthy, we need both. Extreme feminism at one time went to the point where it was degrading of men, and I was aware of that as an unhealthy perspective. My belief about what feminism means is it's an equal valuing of the feminine and the masculine. How am I going to explain this is a feminist power? So, there's my personal power that I hold as a person, and then there's a feminine energy that I hold because I was born female. In my mind, when I am tapped in and grounded, I will be respecting myself as a feminine energy in this world. . . . So if we are healthy and strong, then the masculine energy in this world needs to be equally healthy and strong, otherwise we are out of balance. . . . My feminism is holistic – body, mind and spirit – [as well as] empowering others and having a voice.

_Bronwyn:_ I consider myself a feminist. To me feminism is a movement to bring women up to where they belong, which is equal to men, to respect their gifts, and their abilities. We're not the same. I think feminism maybe swung too far towards male bashing. I don't think that needed to happen. But anger is healthy and it's a normal response when you’ve been oppressed. And I don't agree with all of their stand on abortion, which has become associated with feminism. I don't think all feminists are pro-abortion. I think the women’s movement was necessary to say, "Enough of this. We are different, but we each contribute equally to society and we can, and we should be allowed to do that." So, in that way I consider myself a feminist.
Laurie: I would understand myself as a feminist, and I do call myself a feminist. I don't have problems with the word. It's pretty simple: I want women and children to be as respected as men. And being a feminist is – when there is oppression, if one person is oppressed, every person is oppressed. Although feminism started out talking about just women, intersectional feminism and post-feminism say that any person who is repressed requires that all people respond. Whether it's race, gender, socio-economic status, it's not sufficient to say, “That's ok,” to say, "Oh, that's just the way it is." Because it's not. It's the way it is because we make it that way.
APPENDIX B: Definitions

Catholic entities’ - 50 Catholic entities, either dioceses or religious orders, that ran Indian residential schools.

laity or lay – members of a religious group who are not consecrated members (i.e., not clergy or men/women religious).

liturgy – public worship of the church, also referred to in this thesis as “Mass”

Nuns – “though the term nun technically refers to women belonging to enclosed orders, the author uses the term in its common usage, to denote religious sisters who belong to orders/congregations that live and work in the world” (Brock, 2010, p. 486). The author also uses the term women religious.

parish – refers to the church at a local level. Community is entrusted to a priest under the authority of a bishop.

Second Vatican Council – also referred to as Vatican II. A meeting of the pope and bishops from 1962-1965 to discuss issues regarding the Roman Catholic Church in relation to the modern world.
APPENDIX C: Initial Conversation via telephone or in-person

Initial Conversation via telephone or in-person

Hello, my name is April Weavell. I am a Master of Arts student at Royal Roads University, based in Victoria, BC. I live in Grande Prairie and complete most of my courses online. I am conducting a research project for my thesis, which seeks to understand the experiences of feminist – or woman-conscious – Catholic women as they navigate the Roman Catholic Church’s structures and practices. I’ll be exploring such questions as: what are the barriers and challenges women face? How are they supported? What are their experiences as a feminist Catholic? I hope to also uncover how women find their voice and incite change within the church.

I am looking for women to participate in my study. The women must be Roman Catholic over 30 years old, must attend an Alberta church, be engaged in some capacity in the church, be conscious of role differences between men and women in the church, and, be willing to speak about their experience. I wonder – would you be interested in participating in my study?

You do not have to make a commitment right now, but I can send you further details and you can make a decision once you have read through that information. I don’t want you in any way to feel pressured, and I also want to assure you that you would remain anonymous throughout the entire process. I will not discuss your involvement with anyone and your name will not appear in any documentation, including the final document. You will in no way be identifiable, nor will your parish.

The time commitment is approximately an hour for an interview and potentially another hour for follow up. If you wanted, I could check back with you as I move forward in the research process to ensure you are comfortable with the way your voice has been represented.
APPENDIX D: Email of invitation

Email of invitation

Date [DATE HERE]

Dear [NAME HERE]

I would like to invite you to participate in my research that seeks to understand the experiences of Roman Catholic women as they navigate Church doctrine and practices that may contradict their own values and beliefs. I will be seeking to find out answers to questions like: In what ways do they practice their faith? What are the barriers and challenges they face within the institution? How are they supported, and who or what are those supports? What’s it been like to integrate (or not) their secular life with their spiritual or religious experiences and/or beliefs? Do these women use their voice or actions in an effort to incite change and if so, how?

I am also interested in exploring what it is like to be a Catholic woman who is in a leadership role (in and/or outside the Church), while the Church in Canada and around the world aims to define the role of women in the Church. Pope Francis has called for increased leadership roles for women.

I am a Master of Arts student at Royal Roads University, BC, and reside in Grande Prairie, AB. This research will be conducted as part of my thesis.

I will be interviewing Roman Catholic women from Alberta aged 30 and older. Though the women must be engaged within the Roman Catholic Church in some capacity, they do not have to regularly participate in liturgy. I am also seeking women who identify as leaders (paid or volunteer) within or outside of the Church. Participants must be willing to openly share their experiences.

All women participating in the study will remain anonymous. At no time throughout the entire research project, nor in the final document, will your identity be revealed, nor will any churches be named. Local clergy may read the thesis once it has been approved; however, none of your information will be presented in such a way that it could identify you.

The interviews will be informal and will take place at a location of your choosing, where you have privacy and are most comfortable. Each interview will take approximately one hour and will be audio recorded to ensure I document all of your comments properly (the recording and the written transcripts will be destroyed once the thesis has been approved). None of the documentation will identify you by name.

Due to the spiritual nature of the research, the questions could raise difficult memories or experiences for you. Should you decide during the interview that you have some concerns, or do not wish to proceed, you are welcome to discuss those concerns with me or, if you prefer, to not complete the interview. I would then destroy any notes and recordings.
Following the interview, I will invite you to review your transcript if you wish to ensure I have correctly understood your responses. You will have an opportunity to make revisions to your statements at this time.

My goal is that this research will raise awareness of how contemporary* Catholic women leaders experience and express their faith and the innovative ways they navigate Catholic Church. As the Catholic Church debates the role of women and the kinds of decision-making power women should have within the Church, this is an opportunity for Canadian Catholic women’s experiences and insights to be represented, and to understand the strategies they use to navigate a male-centric culture. I also believe that this is an opportunity to raise the consciousness among Catholic women and men – lay and clergy – of what it is like to be a contemporary woman in today’s Catholic Church.

My research findings may be presented at conferences or in smaller groups, and the research may be published in a journal(s). Again, your name will not appear in any final documentation. I would be pleased to keep you informed of any interest in the research, if you wish to be updated. If you would like to verify any aspect of this research project, I invite you to contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Jennifer Walinga at Royal Roads University. Should you decide to participate, I will invite you to sign a consent form. You will retain a copy of this form.

Thank you so much for your consideration. I will follow up with you in a few days; however, if you have any further questions prior to making a commitment, please do not hesitate to call or email me.

Regards,

April Weavell

*contemporary in this study is defined as women who value and support gender equality
APPENDIX E: Text copy of introductory words where data collection is done in person

Text copy of introductory words where data collection is done in person

Good morning/afternoon.

Thank you again for volunteering to be part of this study. This process will take approximately one hour today.

A reminder that you are not obligated to participate in this study and may choose to withdraw at this time. If you choose to proceed, I will have you read through the consent form, and if you are comfortable proceeding after reading the form, I will ask that you sign and date it. However, even though you have given your consent, at any time during the interview, you have the option of withdrawing from the study. You also have the option of not answering any questions you do not wish to. If you need to stop for any reason, or just want to take a break, that’s not a problem at all. Just let me know – and I’ll check in with you during the interview as well.

Think of this as a conversation – it will be casual, so relax. I will ask you questions; however, if you are not clear, do not hesitate to ask for clarification. There are no right or wrong answers. These are your thoughts, opinions and experiences.

Also a few other reminders:
- your confidentiality will be respected throughout the process
- this is your experience, your story. Please remember – you will have the opportunity to review your transcript of the interview and remove or revise something you shared at that time. You can withdraw from the study up to the time you have completed reviewing your transcript. I know that discussing spirituality can be very personal. I don’t want you to worry about sharing something during the interview, then having second thoughts.

Do you have any questions?
If you are ready, I’ll give you the consent form to read through. Please take your time. Ask me any questions as you read through the form.
If you wish to sign, please go ahead and do so. Any further questions?
Are you ready to proceed?
APPENDIX F: Letter of informed consent

Letter of Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study by April Weavell, student at Royal Roads University located in Victoria, British Columbia. You must be a Roman Catholic woman 30 years or older to participate in the study, and attend a Roman Catholic Church in Alberta. Your participation is voluntary. Please take as much time as you need to read through this form. You will be given a copy of this form.

Purpose of the Study
The study seeks to understand the experiences of feminist, or woman-conscious Catholic women as they navigate the Roman Catholic Church’s hierarchical structures and practices. This research will be conducted as part of a thesis.

Procedures
You are invited to participate in an interview with researcher April Weavell where you will be asked questions about your experience as a feminist or woman-conscious Catholic woman.

The interviews will be informal and will take place at a location of your choosing, where you are most comfortable. Each interview will take approximately one hour and will be audio recorded to ensure all of your comments are properly documented (this recording and the written transcripts will be destroyed once the thesis has been approved). None of the information (recordings, transcript, or final thesis) will identify you by name.

Following the interview, April will invite you to review your transcript to ensure she has correctly understood your responses. You will also have an opportunity make revisions to your statements at this time. Sentences/comments that you ask April to leave out will not be used.

Potential risks and discomfort and withdrawal
Due to the spiritual nature of the research, the questions could raise difficult memories or experiences for you. Should you decide during the interview that you have some concerns, or do not wish to proceed, you are welcome to discuss those concerns with me or, if you prefer, to not complete the interview. Any notes and recordings would be destroyed.

If you volunteer to be in the study, you may withdraw at any time until after you have reviewed the transcripts without any consequences. Once data analysis has commenced, it would not be feasible for participants to withdraw. During the interview, you may also choose not to answer a particular question, but can still remain in the study.

Potential benefits to participants and to society
The goal of this research will provide insight to clergy and to men and women in the church what women-conscious Catholic women’s experiences of their faith is, and more importantly, how we can lead women to full-participation in the church. April also believes that we as women can grow from learning of the challenges our church presents for other women, but also what/who inspires and supports these women.
April may be asked to present her findings at conferences or to groups, and the research may be published in a journal(s). Your privacy will be protected at all times. April will keep you informed of any interest in the research, if you wish to be updated.

Confidentiality
All women participating in the study will remain anonymous; at no time throughout the entire research project, nor in the final document or any further presentations, will your identity be revealed to anyone. The information that has your identifiable information will be kept separately from the rest of the data.

April will be interviewing women from within the Catholic Church in Alberta. No particular churches will be named. As previously discussed, none of your information will be presented in such a way that it could identify you.

Questions about research
If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, or about the research in general, please feel free to contact April Weavell’s thesis advisor, Dr. Jennifer Walinga at Royal Roads University:
Dr. Jennifer Walinga
Director, School of Communication and Culture

Signature indicating your consent to participate in the research

____________________________________________
Name (printed)

____________________________________________
Signature

____________________________________________
Date
APPENDIX G: Themes and sub-themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shaping Her Feminist and Spiritual Identities – Early Years</th>
<th>Conflict and Constraint: Empowered by an Adaptive Sense of Self</th>
<th>Embracing the Wisdom (Through Her Lens)</th>
<th>The Medium is the Message: Feminist Spirit Embodied</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influences of family</td>
<td>Articulating a vision</td>
<td>God as trust and groundedness (soul speak)</td>
<td>“It’s in my bones”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influences of church (parish culture)</td>
<td>Behaviours: Revise, resist, dismiss</td>
<td>Jesus of justice and inclusivity</td>
<td>From the pew to the boardroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choosing to negotiate</td>
<td>Presence: visibility, invisibility</td>
<td>Spiritual and feminist role models (herstory)</td>
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<td>(Re)locating and (Re)Discovery:</td>
<td>Community and connection</td>
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<td><em>Communities of Discernment in her Traditions</em></td>
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<td><em>Communities of Discernment in Difference</em></td>
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